

Women in fisheries community groups: Diving deeper into community-based fisheries management in Kiribati

Tarateiti Uriam Timiti¹

Women's involvement and ownership of community-based fisheries management (CBFM) processes decreased following the development of CBFM plans in Kiribati. The CBFM team within Kiribati's Coastal Fisheries Division supported the creation of women's associations dedicated to fisheries management and community development to ensure that women's participation continues to be visible throughout the implementation stages of CBFM.

Background

Gender equity, disability and social inclusion are crucial aspects of community-based fisheries management. When collaborating with communities on their management plans, it is essential to ensure inclusivity by involving all social groups, including women, men, youth, and elders in the development of management plans (Delisle et al. 2021). In Kiribati, inclusivity in participation and in the CBFM decision-making process is ensured through a two-stage process. First, elders, men, women, young men, young women work in separate groups to formulate their own priorities and ideas for the CBFM plan. Secondly, a community-wide discussion is then held where all inputs are heard and debated to draft the content of a community-wide CBFM plan. This two-stage process ensures that interests in different fisheries and opinions from otherwise marginalised groups are made visible. However, despite those efforts to include different voices in the CBFM process, the roles of marginalised groups, especially women, following the adoption of a CBFM plan often became unclear and consequently invisible. Recognising this issue, a community women's initiative was established by the CBFM team in six communities in North Tarawa, Butaritari and Abaiang.

The approach

An initiative in Kiribati was established to ensure women's participation in fisheries management remains visible throughout the implementation of a community-based fisheries management (CBFM) plan. The initiative is based on the formation and ongoing support to community women's associations. The idea originated in Tabonibara in North Tarawa in late 2020. During the review of Tabonibara's community management plan, the CBFM team found that women were expressing that they had had little involvement in the implementation and enforcement of the rules of the plan. They no longer felt full ownership of the developed CBFM plan. Faced with this problem, the CBFM team in partnership with the women of Tabonibara decided that bringing women together as an association (with the support of men in the community), dedicated to supporting the conservation and management of marine resources, would help make women feel more involved (Nikiari et al. 2021) and make their roles more visible. Positive feedback from members of the association and flow-on impact on the work of the CBFM team (Nikiari et al. 2021) prompted the expansion of the initiative to five additional communities, another village in North Tarawa, two in Butaritari and

¹ Coastal Fisheries Division, MFMRD, Tarawa, Kiribati; tarateitiu@mfmrd.gov.ki

Timiti Community Women's meeting @ Tarateiti Uriam



FREE TRAINING IN NANIKAAI 29-30 JAN ON PLASTIC BOTTLE REPURPOSING

Te reirei iaon te karaobwai man te
mange ae te plasitc bwatoro nakon
te bwai ni karikirake



Eang e FREE AKEA BOON TE REIREI. Bongina man te Moanibong 29 Tianuare nakon te Kauabong 30 Tianuare. Te tabo bon Nanikaai. Tarebonia MFMRD 75021525 ke TAK 75125998 ibukin rongorongona ae bwainin.

two in Abaiang. While initially focused on enhancing the effectiveness of the CBFM plan by promoting women's active involvement, the women groups recognised broader concerns and priorities that required attention. Through consultations with women in these communities, common issues such as waste management and livelihood opportunities emerged as pressing priorities (Uriam et al. 2022). Such feedback was essential for the CBFM team to plan interventions that meet specific women's needs effectively.

To address these needs that went beyond the expertise of the CBFM team, its members sought support from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives to conduct financial literacy training to members of these women's associations. The financial literacy training proved to be enlightening and practical, helping participants understand their daily spending habits, identify common household expenses, and other non-immediate financial obligations. Participants also assessed their income-generating activities (including fisheries-related livelihoods) to determine if they were living within their means, revealing that many were indeed facing financial challenges.

One crucial piece of feedback from training participants was the importance for future training to involve both spouses. Recognising that decisions about finances often involve both partners, the women themselves emphasised the need for couples to undergo the training together. Implementing

newfound financial knowledge becomes more effective when both partners share a common understanding. By involving both husbands and wives in the training, families can better manage their finances and make informed decisions together. This inclusive approach ensures that the benefits of financial literacy extend beyond individual participants to the entire family unit, fostering financial stability and unity within households. This feedback will now inform the delivery of further financial literacy activities.

Another prevalent issue identified by all women's groups was improper waste management. This is a widespread problem in Kiribati due to inadequate waste disposal infrastructure and a general lack of awareness on the impacts of littering and pollution on both human health and the natural environment, especially in the outer islands. Recognising this urgent need, women's groups, such as the Tabonibara community women's group, initiated efforts to address the issue and raise awareness (Uriam et al. 2022). Litter is an important matter to women involved in coastal fisheries in Kiribati due to the high level of bivalves being harvested and consumed (Andrew et al. 2020). Similarly, Bikati women in Butaritari launched a cleaning campaign, taking the lead in cleaning and organising their homes and village. They also participated in cleaning public spaces such as pathways and meeting areas. However, ecosystem health remains a concern, prompting discussions on long-term solutions to keep villages clean. This issue needs to be addressed holistically

at the village level, by the island council, the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agriculture Development and all key stakeholders.

One potential long-term solution involves repurposing plastic waste, an initiative that was introduced during a training session for women. Based on the principles of the circular economy, this training aimed to teach women how to transform plastic waste into useful items like flowers and earrings. The first such training took place during the launch of the Nanikaai management plan in early 2024 and was



At Nanikaai launching event. @MFMRD

led by the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agriculture Development in collaboration with Tourism Authority of Kiribati. While this approach offers a step towards addressing the issue, it is not a comprehensive solution. To achieve lasting impact, more effective measures, such as enforcing littering rules through women's groups, may be necessary. By empowering women to enforce regulations and promote responsible waste disposal practices, communities can work towards sustainable solutions for waste management that have a detrimental impact on the environment.

A national CBFM stakeholder meeting held in Butaritari in August 2023, provided an opportunity for women from these communities to share experiences and learn from each other (Uriam et al. 2022). Skills workshops, including crafting handicrafts from seashells, seaweed ice-cream making, were organised, alongside additional financial literacy training sessions for those who had not yet participated. Furthermore, representatives from the Ministry of Women, Youth, Sports and Social Affairs presented policies on gender and gender-based violence, enriching the dialogue on women's empowerment and community development.

An interesting finding from the crafting skills workshop was that there was limited knowledge and skills among women regarding marine-based livelihood activities beyond fish selling. Women need to tap into their creativity to explore the wealth of marine resources available to them and devise ways to transform them into valuable products. Fortunately, there are existing initiatives across Kiribati led by pioneering women who have found substantial success in crafting seashell handicrafts whom members of the six associations can learn from. Additionally, there is cultural significance in attached to using seashells for crafting dancing costume accessories, presenting a prime opportunity for the women's group to further strengthen this tradition and potentially develop a sustainable income-generating activity.

Building cohesiveness

While there are already established women's groups at national and island levels, as well as within faith-based organisations, Kiribati lacks community women's groups like the ones described here, which actively promote the participation of all village women and focus on sustainable management of natural resources, environmental conservation, livelihood, and food security. Despite originating from the fisheries sector, this women's initiative's objectives are expansive, aiming to empower women to engage with various sectors for enhanced support.

At the community level, the established women's groups aim to provide additional support to women, strengthening fisheries management efforts, promoting sustainable use of resources, and acknowledging women's capabilities. Moreover, they seek to empower women within households to contribute to improving their lives and fulfill their social obligations financially, including those to the church community.

This initiative may be perceived as a duplication of existing effort on the empowerment of women or as an additional burden upon women. However, community-level

women's groups offer a unique platform that transcends denominational boundaries. Unlike existing faith-based women's groups, which often remain confined to specific denominations, these six community women's groups focus on shared interests within a village in achieving better and more sustainable livelihoods. This inclusive approach fosters unity and collaboration, enhancing the groups' strength and potential for positive outcomes. Additionally, these groups empower members to influence decisions at the village level, enhancing their visibility and recognition within the community. For instance, in Tabonibara village of North Tarawa, the women's group has gained meaningful recognition at the village level, leading to shared decision-making within the community. Normally, executive members of the village committee would handle administrative matters on their own. However, with the establishment of the Tabonibara women's group, members of the village committee can now delegate certain responsibilities to the women, promoting a more inclusive approach.

At an island level, there are established women's groups that welcome all women across the island, boasting an elected executive committee. However, despite its inclusive membership, many women from the different villages remain inactive. Operating from the grassroots level, these community groups have the potential to deeply impact all women within a village. Community-level women's groups complements the island-level women's group and enhances active participation at the village level. By becoming well-established, robust, and dynamic at the grassroots, the community group can ultimately strengthen the island-level women's group, making its function smoother and more effective.

Reflections

As we reflect on this new journey with the women's groups, there are clearly numerous benefits of this initiative, not only for the women involved but for the entire village. All six women's groups have now been formally registered as incorporated societies and have identified various issues and priorities. While some groups have already begun addressing their immediate concerns, others are still in the early stages. Nevertheless, the fact that these six women's groups are now formally established and ready to work with support, is a significant achievement.

To keep these women's groups active and progressing, the CBFM team has developed a clear plan of action. This includes the future launch of a Facebook page to aid in marketing members' products and showcasing the women's groups' achievements through photo and video updates. Additionally, the women will be urged to adopt relevant rules from their fisheries management plans. Seeking out grant opportunities to secure funding for necessary equipment and training is also a priority. Such assistance has been provided to a few communities, and as of May 2024, they had won several grants for items such as boats, fishing canoes, and toilets.

Essentially, the goal is to elevate their visibility at the national and regional level through social media platforms, inviting them to participate in national events like trade fairs, and crucially, raising awareness at the island level.

This initiative aims to tackle the issue of women's underrepresentation in the implementation of management plans. Moreover, it serves as a means to ensure the sustainability of CBFM, impacting families on a deeper level beyond merely managing fisheries resources.

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