

# Gender and tuna industries in the Pacific Islands

Kate Barclay<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

*Tuna fisheries are vitally important for Pacific Island countries, bringing in government revenue and jobs. Readers may wonder why it is important to think about gender in relation to tuna industries. Industrial fishing vessels are generally all-male environments, so is gender relevant? Onshore processing factories provide employment for many women, so perhaps the gender question is already solved with regard to processing? Gender is about women and men in all their diversities and about social expectations regarding male and female roles that shape people's lives. A gender lens reveals the impacts of social issues in port areas when seafarers take shore leave, and on families when men go away for long periods of time for tuna fishing work. A gender lens helps reveal opportunities and obstacles for women and men working in tuna processing and fisheries management, and directions for improving development benefits from these industries.*

This paper draws on a review of published articles and technical reports on tuna industries in the Pacific as part of a project to expand the Pacific Handbook for Gender Equity and Social Inclusion for Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (Barclay et al. 2019). The literature on tuna industries in the Pacific shows that in some countries tuna fisheries provide hundreds of jobs for men on fishing vessels, and thousands of jobs for women on processing lines, as well as many jobs for men and women in administration, finance, quality control, service and supply businesses, engineering services, and in public sector tuna fisheries management and science (Barclay 2012; Barclay and Cartwright 2007; Gillett 2016; McClean et al. 2019). Women's roles in some areas have changed over time. Within tuna companies and government fisheries agencies, women have always worked in administrative jobs, but now are employed in technical roles and management, and even on fishing vessels. This paper looks at some of the positive and negative impacts arising from tuna industries in the Pacific Islands region.

## Gender in tuna fishing

A gender lens helps reveal some of the social and economic impacts from industrial tuna fisheries. When men take up work on tuna fishing vessels, they are gone for long periods of time, and wives must pick up their absent husbands' responsibilities. From a social perspective, the families of seafarers struggle to keep their relationships intact, and there are higher rates of separation and divorce among these couples (Barclay 2008). In patriarchal societies in the Pacific, it may be difficult for female-headed households to claim their rights in community decision-making, especially with regard to land. Under poor leadership, fishing vessels with all-male crews can develop cultures that involve violence, bullying, substance abuse and unhealthy relationships with women.

The shore leave habits of tuna fishing crews, like that of other seafarers, can increase the risk of harm to crew, their families and surrounding communities. Currently, due to COVID-19

restrictions, crew members are not allowed to come ashore on leave. During the global COVID-19 crisis, international seafarers have also been unable to transfer through ports to go home for leave, so most have been onboard for many months or over a year, working long hours with few or no days off. Some welcome the fact of still having a job, but it is psychologically and physically very difficult (INFOFISH 2020). Shore leave often involves alcohol, drugs, gambling and sex, including with sex workers. Not all fishers want to "party", but it is considered normal, and because crew members live together in close quarters on vessels, it can be hard to escape, and there may be group pressure on colleagues to participate. Crew members who do not want to party need other places to go and other things to do, such as shopping malls, movie theatres and sports grounds. The ports where tuna landing or transshipments occurs in the Pacific Islands region, however, have limited recreational facilities.

Some Pacific Islanders are staunchly Christian and view sex out of wedlock and transactional sex as morally wrong. Selling sexual services is illegal in most places in the Pacific Islands. A complicating factor is that in some places, there is an historical precedent whereby visiting seafarers, usually men trading ceremonial valuables, were offered local women or adolescent girls for sexual purposes as part of cultures of hospitality and reciprocity (Crooke et al. 2016). Women and girls themselves, as well their families, expected material goods in return (Crook et al. 2016). In contemporary times, local men and women may be drawn to foreign fishing crews for access to alcohol and drugs. After initially befriending crew through drinking parties, young women may become involved in transactional sex, or they may continue partying with seafarers as friends (Vunisea 2006a).

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a major tuna transshipping hub, where fish are moved from fishing vessels to carrier vessels. Each year, thousands of seafarers from around Asia and the Pacific frequent the small atoll of Majuro, with a population of approximately 27,000 people. At sea, seafarers are isolated, confined and under strict rules.

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123 Broadway NSW 2007, Australia. Email: Kate.Barclay@uts.edu.au



Industrial tuna fishing vessels tied up at the wharf in Noro, Solomon Islands. ©Kate Barclay

Once they arrive in port, they are approached by sex workers and offered alcohol. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are having a major impact on the reproductive health of both women and men in RMI (Vunisea 2006b; Crook et al. 2016).

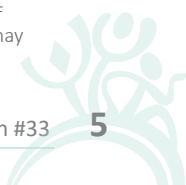
The kinds of sexual liaisons that seafarers have in port tend to be quite risky, and crew may be under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. This means seafarers can be vectors for STIs, by bringing them from one port to another. There is a particular problem with HIV/AIDS. In some places, all or nearly all HIV/AIDS cases are linked to seafarers who have returned home and infected their wives.

Some seafarers prefer younger partners, believing they are less likely to have STIs. Women apprehended for engaging in sex work when returning from tuna fishing vessels in Kiribati and RMI in the early 2000s were between ages 14 and 26 (Vunisea 2006a, b). Children are more vulnerable to exploitation in these situations, and are less able to give true consent. The age of consent for sexual intercourse was recently raised from 16 to 18 years in Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia as a result of advocacy work by a local civil society

organisation, in part to create a legal barrier against seafarers' having sex with children (Kaselehlle Press 2019).

The masculine seafaring culture in the tuna industry can lead to violence and poor treatment of women by some men, and the situation is worsened by substance abuse. Women having sex with visiting seafarers may be frowned upon by the rest of society, and so can be particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. The criminalisation of sex work pushes it underground. Transactional sex already has a social stigma and when it is also illegal, it is driven further underground and makes people who are more vulnerable to rape and other violence less able to seek help from health services or the justice system if they are attacked (Vunisea 2006a, b). There are alternatives to criminalisation for addressing some of the gender equality and human rights problems that arise around transactional sex. In Fiji, there have been examples of successfully engaging with sex workers to empower them to protect themselves and help prevent the spread of STIs through a multi-stakeholder approach, including through church groups, youth groups, women's groups, elders' groups, and local level government groups (Arama and Associates 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The term "sex work" was coined in the 1970s as a term that sex workers preferred to the negative term "prostitute". The term "sex work" includes all genders, and highlights the fact that the activity is a form of employment. People whose relationships are on the friendship end of the spectrum, or who have little choice regarding their livelihood, may not identify as sex workers. People who feel they have no alternative may object to the term "sex worker" because it implies they choose this line of work (Crossette 2015).



The kinds of sexual arrangements between locals and visiting seafarers vary. Some are explicitly work, with the expectation that cash, fish or other goods will be paid for services.<sup>2</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, there are loose arrangements where locals are friends with crew members on fishing vessels who give them gifts. Some of these people enter into these relations of their own free will, and some people – who have little choice about it – enter through a lack of livelihood options, or coercion by family members. Power inequalities – between women and men, older and younger people, people with and without money – affect sexual relations in general, including with seafarers.

Care should be taken with the words we use to talk about these activities because of the stigma involved, and the stigma can pass on to children who are born from these relationships. Having a social stigma means that when problems happen, these people may be unwilling to seek help, or if they do seek help, they may be judged rather than given assistance. Women and girls interacting with seafarers are called shaming names such as *kabawaqa* in Fiji, *two kina meri* in Papua New Guinea, *dugong* in Solomon Islands, and *te korekoreas* in Kiribati (Sullivan et al. 2008).

Many large tuna fishing vessels transship their catches in Tarawa – Kiribati’s capital – and crew members typically go ashore to purchase goods and services in town, including sex. Many people from Kiribati’s outer islands come to Tarawa seeking work, or a different life in town, but not all of them find

work. Tarawa is overcrowded and has serious unemployment problems. According to the non-governmental women’s organisation Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati, some families without employment in the Betio area have arrangements with Korean and Taiwanese fishing crews, whereby families make their daughters available for sex in exchange for fish, which the families eat or sell. Other children and young women may seek out crews independently on their own. Because so many of the seafarers seeking sex in port were Korean, these girls and women came to be called *te korekoreas* (Vunisea 2006a).

It should be noted that there are also many interactions with visiting seafarers that do not involve sex or substance abuse. When tuna fishing vessels are in port to offload the catch, many locals go out to the tuna boats in canoes or dinghies to sell fruit, vegetables, tobacco, soft drinks, and other items. One of the main objectives of locals is to receive “reject” fish from the tuna fishing vessels, which can then be sold in local markets or taken home to feed the family. This fish forms an important part of food systems in port areas where industrial tuna vessels transship, such as South Tarawa in Kiribati, and Honiara in Solomon Islands. Fish from the industrial vessels are sold direct in markets, or are cooked by some vendors and sold as fish and chips, curries or stews. Women are key players in the value chain, making livelihoods from the fish coming from industrial vessels (McClean et al. 2019).

Finally, it is possible that the convention of all-male tuna fishing crews may change. Pacific Islands leaders have

National Fisheries Development purse-seine vessel at Noro, Solomon Islands. ©Kate Barclay





Maintenance work on a purse-seine net in Noro, Solomon Islands. ©Kate Barclay

committed to encouraging the employment of more women in the maritime sector. In 2019, transport ministers from around the Pacific Islands region endorsed the “Regional Strategy for Pacific Women in Maritime 2020–2024”, which includes improving equal opportunity and safe working environments on vessels for women. In 2018, the National Fisheries Development, Ltd. – the only domestic-based fishing company in Solomon Islands – offered three women cadetships on tuna fishing vessels (IFC 2019). The Australian government – in partnership with Papua New Guinea (PNG) shipping companies – has supported cadetships for women to study at maritime colleges and train on vessels at sea, on a career path to become captains or chief engineers (Loop PNG 2019). The World Wide Fund for Nature – with funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade – is training women fishing crews, as well as men, in sustainable fishing methods (WWF 2020).

### Gender in tuna processing

Tuna processing factories in American Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, RMI and Solomon Islands have long provided jobs for women in peri-urban or rural areas where cash-paid work for women is scarce. Cash-paid work helps women integrate themselves and their families into society by becoming eligible to use banks for savings or credit, by opening up new social networks beyond the family, and the learning opportunities

that paid work brings. Women earning money are better able to support their children’s educational needs and fulfil other social obligations that require financial contributions, such as funerals and church fundraising.

Several studies over the years have identified a range of gender issues in the tuna processing sector in the Pacific Islands region (Barclay et al. 2015; Sullivan et al. 2008; Tuara Demmke 2006). A key point is that for many Pacific Islanders, the shift to working for cash is a huge social and cultural change. Many tuna workers are the first generation in their family to have wage employment, and the social rules within the work place are very different from those of the village where they have lived previously. When women take up wage work, adjustments must be made with regard to family responsibilities.

High rates of staff turnover and absenteeism, which reduces productivity, is an ongoing issue in the tuna processing sector in the Pacific Islands (Tuara Demmke 2006; Barclay and Cartwright 2007; Barclay et al. 2015). The reasons behind high rates of turnover and absenteeism among women processors are heavily influenced by social expectations, in that women are responsible for domestic duties and childcare, even if they also work outside the home. Women experience high levels of violence in much of the Pacific Islands region, which contributes to absenteeism and low productivity.

Other factors include the fact that women are exhausted from working a “double shift” of paid work followed by “family work” when they get home (Emberson-Bain 1994; Tuara Demmke 2006; Sullivan et al. 2008).

Because women are often the primary caregivers for children, child care is very important for women who work outside the home and who have young children. Most child care in the Pacific is informal – it can be from women relatives who then share some of the cash income, or a domestic worker or “house girl”. Some places have formal child care centres. For women living away from family networks and earning a low income, it can be difficult to afford child care. A lack of affordable child care is a key factor causing women to leave work in tuna processing in Solomon Islands (Barclay et al. 2015).

Many tuna processing facilities in the Pacific Islands region are affected by the wider problem of poor housing in peri-urban areas. Overcrowding and a lack of clean water can cause health problems, which in turn increase absenteeism. Infrequent public transport can lengthen the working day by hours, and may be very expensive relative to wages. Public transport can also be unsafe for women in terms of sexual harassment or violence, especially for women finishing shifts late at night and travelling home in the dark.

The low wages paid to tuna processing workers also cause high turnover and absenteeism. Tuna processing work, like entry-level crew work on fishing vessels, pays very low wages. Some companies offer benefits that supplement wages, such as subsidised transport, opportunities for training, company credit schemes, superannuation or health insurance. The total package for most employees, however, is still low. In many countries, a minimum wage is set by the government, but this may not be enough to support a family with housing and education.

In PNG and Solomon Islands, women who have access to land for gardening or access to the sea to fish can make much more money selling food at markets than working in tuna factories. Many women start working at a tuna processing facility when they are young and wanting to try something different from village life. They typically then stop tuna work when they have children and want more flexibility in income opportunities. Women who remain working on processing lines do so because they prefer working for paid wages to village life, or because they lack farming land or their family situation means they cannot make a living from market activities (Campbell 2008; Barclay 2012; Havice and Reed 2012).

At the SolTuna factory in Solomon Islands, the management found that women ran out of money before the end of the pay cycle and were taking time off for market activities to raise money for food. Many of these women were the first generation in their family to live on a cash income, and so did not have experience in managing a household cash budget. Some wage earners also face demands from relatives to share their income. Financial literacy training has improved these women’s capacity to live on cash wages. Some started saving

for housing and other improvements in their lives. After implementing financial literacy training, absenteeism at SolTuna dropped from 18% to 12% (Pacific Women 2019).

In addition to the tuna cleaning lines where women have conventionally worked, tuna factories are able to employ women in non-traditional areas. For example, SolTuna had a scheme to train women in the maintenance and engineering department but were unable to recruit many women. The company had more success with training women in how to drive a forklift. Nako Fisheries in PNG’s Milne Bay Province has employed women in roles such as mechanics and electricians for many years (Kinch and Bagita 2003). Social perceptions about certain types of jobs being for women or for men tend to discourage people from seeking employment in non-traditional roles. If women (or men) take up work in non-traditional roles, pressures from family and workplace cultures may make women (or men) feel unwelcome, and can make it difficult to stay in these roles. One challenge for companies employing women in previously all-male areas is to factor in maternity leave and make arrangements that enable women to breastfeed their infants when they return to work. Lack of child care that is in close proximity to the workplace makes breastfeeding difficult (Barclay et al. 2015). Governments could take a role and use taxation revenue to support working mothers so that they can continue to breastfeed at childcare facilities that are near to tuna processing facilities.

In the tuna industry, women have conventionally been in lower paid and less senior roles than men (Barclay et al. 2015). This is not specific to tuna, nor to the Pacific Islands region. It occurs broadly across most societies globally. Deborah Telek is a senior manager in the South Seas Tuna Corporation processing company in Wewak, PNG (FFA 2019). Deborah started working in tuna with her father. One of the things she likes best about working in the fishing industry is the wide range of things she has to do and the variety of people that she interacts with, including different government agencies, service providers and staff. She also enjoys the opportunity to contribute to the future of the industry through international meetings such as the meetings of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. The fact that Deborah has succeeded as a manager in a tuna company shows that it is possible for women to become senior managers, but the small number of women in such roles means there is still much work to do in making opportunities equal.

## Gender in tuna fisheries management

Prior to the 1990s, fisheries management was predominantly the domain of men, with women mostly working in administrative roles. This has changed a lot in the Pacific Islands region over the last couple of decades. For example, the current Director General of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) is a woman, Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen.<sup>3</sup> While most senior roles such as permanent secretary within government fisheries agencies are still filled primarily by men, women have taken up fisheries management roles all

<sup>3</sup> A profile of Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen can be found at: <https://coastfish.spc.int/en/publications/bulletins/women-in-fisheries/504>



Industrial tuna fishing vessel at Noro, Solomon Islands. ©Kate Barclay

around the Pacific Islands region as well as in regional fisheries management and scientific organisations. For example, many women work in the competent authorities responsible for food safety in processed tuna exports.

Berry Muller, Chief Fisheries Officer for Oceanic Fisheries at the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA), studied marine science at college, and since joining MIMRA her career has progressed through many of the most important organisations for tuna fisheries management and science in the region (Forum Fisheries Agency 2019). Berry had a professional attachment with the Oceanic Fisheries Program of the Pacific Community, and has also been a member of the Technical and Compliance Committee of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and with FFA's Management Options Committee. She has worked alongside other women in fisheries, such as Lucy Joy from Vanuatu and Pamela Maru from Cook Islands, both of whom now also hold senior positions in their respective national fisheries agencies. Berry also gained valuable mentorship from men in fisheries management, such as MIMRA's Glen Joseph.

Improving gender equality and social inclusion in fisheries management and science means more than just increasing the numbers of women employed in various roles. It is about

changing the structures and cultures of organisations so that all forms of diversity are recognised, valued, accommodated and can improve the work of organisations. In the Pacific Islands region, gender mainstreaming is being carried out to improve gender equality in the public service sector and in regional organisations. Gender mainstreaming considers the impacts on women and men of any planned action, legislation, policy or programme in all areas and at all levels, as a normal part of public service work (see for example, Braun 2012).

FFA has a Gender Equity Framework that shows the kinds of things oceanic fisheries management organisations can do to promote gender equality: 1) commit to gender mainstreaming, including building capacity for gender awareness, and improving equal opportunity in recruitment processes; 2) measuring and monitoring progress towards improving gender equality and reporting on it regularly; 3) making a senior manager, the Director General of Corporate Services, responsible for improving gender equality within FFA; 4) committing to understanding and improving gender issues in fishing, processing, trading, management and anti-IUU (illegal, unreported and/or unregulated fishing) activities; and 5) encouraging gender analysis and sex disaggregated statistics for tuna industries.

Women have been less prominent in monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) work than in other areas of fisheries management because MCS includes the role of onboard fisheries observer. Oceanic fisheries observers live and work on fishing vessels for weeks or months at a time. Only a small percentage of tuna fisheries observers in the Pacific Islands region are women. Rachael Luru from PNG has worked as an observer on tuna fishing vessels for many years (Pacific Community 2020). It is tough work, living aboard for weeks or months on tuna fishing vessels out at sea. Several fisheries observers have been beaten up, “disappeared”, or presumed murdered (HRAS 2020). It is particularly difficult for women because of the all-male environments where bathrooms and sleeping arrangements are shared and some male crew watch or touch women (or men) without their permission. Onboard cultures that allow violence and intrusion into personal space are based on ideas about how “strong” men should behave.

Promotion to higher management levels within MCS has often been dependent on having experience as an onboard observer. There are, however, non-observer roles that give valid experience for MCS, such as port monitoring, so the essential criteria for promotion are being expanded in some organisations with the result that more women are taking up MCS management roles. Recent intakes for the Certificate IV Fisheries Enforcement and Compliance Course, have included about one-third women participants (FCG ANZDEC 2018). It is likely that the work of onboard observers will be partially replaced by automated video surveillance on vessels in the future. Then, observer work would shift onshore, where the video transmission would be monitored; and would, perhaps, make for a safer work environment for both women and men.

## Conclusion

Tuna industries have brought many opportunities to the Pacific, as well as some negative social impacts. Looking at gender relations in tuna industries helps illuminate how those negative impacts might be addressed, and reveals where benefits could be further improved. The health of crews, their families and communities near port areas could be improved through health and social services and a wider range of recreational activities for crew members. Training can assist low-income cannery workers to make the most of their pay, and enable women to move into traditionally male areas of work. Being the first women in all-male work areas can be difficult, so time will tell whether these initiatives succeed. Senior women working in tuna companies and fisheries management help provide role models for people imagining the possibilities of careers in this sector that is large and economically important in the Pacific.

## Acknowledgements

The work behind this paper was a team effort. Senoveva Maui, Nicholas McClean, Natalie Makhoul, Sangeeta Mangubhai and Jeff Kinch all contributed to drafts of the Pacific Handbook for Gender Equity and Social Inclusion for Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture, from which this paper was drawn.

The handbook draft was also contributed to by participants in a writing workshop hosted by the Pacific Community (9–10 March 2020 in Suva, Fiji) for developing additional modules for the Pacific Handbook for Gender Equity and Social Inclusion for Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture.

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