

What does economic empowerment look like for women fishers in the Pacific?

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Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women) was announced by the Australian Government at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meeting in August 2012. The programme commits up to AUD 320 million over 10 years in 14 Pacific Islands Forum member countries, and aims at improving opportunities for the political, social and economic advancement of Pacific women. Pacific Women will support countries in meeting the commitments they made in the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration in 2012. Pacific Women's focus areas are: leadership and decision-making; economic empowerment; ending violence against women; and enhancing agency.² Pacific Women is managed by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), with strategies and implementation guided by the values and intentions of Pacific Island people and governments. The Pacific Women Support Unit provides the programme with logistical, technical and administrative support and is based in Suva, Fiji, with a sub-office in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Women fishers in the Pacific are resilient, adaptable and creative in how they link to markets and address multiple barriers to their economic empowerment. For *nama* (seagrapes) fishers in Fiji, this means using trusted public bus drivers to transport their product to market and to return with the cash from the sales. Similar relationships of trust in Solomon Islands have seen a collective of rural women grow their joint savings to more than SBD³ 2 million in just a few years of careful community-based organising. While work done in Fiji to quantify the value of women fishers' investments and assets, post-natural disaster, also indicates the economic gain that they bring to their communities.

These were among the stories shared during a panel on 'Achievements and opportunities in Pacific fisheries for women's economic empowerment', organised by WorldFish and the Wildlife Conservation Society, at the recent Pacific Women Regional Learning Forum on Women's Economic Empowerment. The Learning Forum, convened by the Pacific Women programme brought together 150 development practitioners, community organisers, policy-makers and researchers from around the region. Discussions during the three-day forum, from 27-30 May at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, focused on social norms change, inclusion of diverse women in development, and building enabling environments for realising women's economic empowerment.

Speaking on the women in fisheries panel at the Learning Forum, experienced researcher Aliti Vunisea noted how cultural norms can be important enablers of women's economic empowerment. Cultural knowledge in the form of traditional fishing practices also underpins how women manage, process and transport their catch and harvest. In Fiji, kinship networks are key to women fishers' ability to pool resources and share tasks based on unwritten rules of work. In one example, women established a rotating responsibility to attend market. This meant that the other women in the collective then gained time, a particularly precious resource in the face of competing productive and reproductive work priorities.⁴ Rosemary McIndoe, a woman fisher who travelled from Namuaimada (north coast of Viti Levu) to attend the Learning Forum, cited a lack of time as her key challenge, along with the cost of transport to market.

There was some debate across the three days of the Learning Forum regarding the perceived burden of certain socio-cultural norms. Participants noted that women in both rural and urban areas of the Pacific face diverse cultural obligations that can mean heavy financial and work burdens. These obligations are gendered, with women often encountering long hours of work to meet cultural and community expectations. However, for speakers such as Ms Vunisea and Dr Alice Pollard, the complex web of kinship, social and cultural norms in rural and remote areas of the Pacific offer more in the way

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² <https://pacificwomen.org/about-us/our-approach/>

³ SBD: Solomon Islands dollar (SBD 1.00 = AUD 0.17, June 2019)

⁴ <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/discover/reproductive-labour-and-care/>



of opportunities for women's economic empowerment. Dr Pollard shared her learning on working with cultural and religious institutions that govern women's lives in the Pacific: 'Chip away where it is softer'.

Dr Pollard, Pacific scholar and community organiser, began her presentation with a reality check on what it means to live in a rural and remote Pacific community: 'Rural for us means no power, no road, no regular transport and no banking services'. She described the regular community-community collection process for the women's savings clubs that she works with, where much of the income is earned through coastal fisheries. In her work with the West 'Are Are Rokotanikeni Association (WARA), Dr Pollard takes an adaptive development approach, where the organisation learns by doing: 'We say "let's experiment with this idea"'. This approach led to WARA's network of 12 women's savings groups and over 1000 members reaching SBD 2 million in savings in 2018. WARA is an example of a contextually relevant and locally driven women's economic empowerment initiative, which has led to 'long-term, self-sustained livelihoods, and is transforming the lives of thousands of women across Solomon Islands'.⁵

Strong partnerships are one of WARA's strengths, and WorldFish Solomon Islands is working with the organisation to reach rural women and support their fisheries-based livelihoods. Margaret Batalofo said WorldFish is learning from global and local researchers who suggest working with local established women's groups rather than costly fisheries interventions that focus only on men. In their work with WARA, women's groups decided on their own project priorities that led to a solar-powered freezer project that both preserved catches and generated income for the women. Importantly, WorldFish is working closely with the Malaita Provincial Government to share learning from the project, and help policy-makers incorporate women-focused efforts in fisheries development.

Dr Sangeeta Mangubhai of the Wildlife Conservation Society is also working with government agencies to help support a gender-sensitive response to women in coastal fisheries

affected by natural disasters. Working with partner organisations, surveys were conducted in 154 communities in Fiji affected by Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016. They were seeking to help identify the fisheries-dependent communities most in need of assistance in the aftermath of the category 5 cyclone. While responses often focused on the needs of men who fished and who are perceived as having lost the most in terms of assets, the Wildlife Conservation Society and partners survey uncovered and debunked these gendered assumptions. For example, among the villages surveyed in Ba Province, women and men lost assets of a similar value: men lost fishing equipment valued at FJD 156,164, while women lost a little more at FJD 161,972. These data matter if decision-makers, development agencies and government departments can use it to appropriately respond in disaster recovery. The numbers can tell us which communities are most fisheries-dependent, and who in those communities is most in need of assistance, including both women and men.

Using a gender lens in analysing fisheries livelihoods can also help governments and development agencies understand a lot more about the local context for disaster recovery and adaptation. Dr Mangubhai's research documented the resilience of women fishers and the strategies they use to recover from disaster. Women were found to access multiple habitats and fisheries in their harvesting activities, enabling rapid adaptation when particular fisheries were destroyed by a cyclone. This means, for example, if fishing nets have been destroyed, the women may switch to catching mud crabs, or harvesting *kuta* reeds for hand crafting. However, men's fishing activities tend to have a much narrower focus and can be completely stalled by cyclone-destroyed boats. Yet, experience shared in the room showed that the majority of post-disaster assistance ends up distributed according to existing power hierarchies – meaning that it is largely men who benefit.

There is now considerable data from the Pacific showing women's roles in coastal fisheries and how they drive local economies in rural and remote areas. There are stories of women's adaptability and resilience, and key role in enabling fisher communities to recover from natural disasters. However, the question is when and how policy shapers and decision-makers use this information to address the needs of Pacific women.

For more information on Pacific Women:
<https://pacificwomen.org/>

⁵ International Women's Development Agency. 2016. Available at: <https://iwda.org.au/case-study-west-areare-rokotanikeni-association-solomon-islands/>