

Gender inclusion and mainstreaming in Fiji's offshore fisheries sector

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Background

Gender inclusion and mainstreaming in the tuna longline industry in Fiji is still a relatively new area. The National Gender Policy for Fiji (2014) states the need for gender inclusion in all sectors of employment in Fiji; however, there has been minimal progress on gender mainstreaming work in the tuna longline industry. Cultural beliefs, social and religious norms and gender stereotypes continue to influence gender relations and can be barriers to women's participation in this sector (Vunisea 2021).

The offshore fisheries component of WWF Pacific's Sustainable Fisheries and Seafood Program is an advocacy,

awareness, research and policy input initiative that involves working with the global WWF network and national, regional and international partner organisations and government to improve the health and management of tuna fisheries in the Pacific Islands region.

As part of improving understanding of the longline fishing sector from a socio-economic and cultural perspective with a focus on gender inclusion and mainstreaming in the offshore fisheries sector, gender and fisheries expert Aliti Vunisea was commissioned to undertake a desktop research and analysis and carry out consultations with stakeholders.

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FMA Offshore Fishing Skipper Programme students offloading a by-product fish species at Fiji Fish Jetty in Lami. © Ravai Vafo'ou/WWF Pacific





Solander Pacific Pte Ltd fishing crew offloading yellowfin tuna at Mua-i-Walu port, Suva. © Ravai Vafo'ou/WWF Pacific

Desktop gender analysis

In the industrial fisheries sector, despite policies aiming to create employment, women's participation in the sector continues to be marginalised. In recent years some women in the Pacific have become observers on tuna fishing vessels and some are engaged in shore-based activities, but these have happened at a slow pace. In Fiji, there have been very few women employed on fishing vessels. Employment within the Fiji Fishing Industry Association membership in 2020 involving 63 fishing vessels from 18 companies, which included employment in fishing activities (seagoing), fish processing (onshore), cold storage, engineering workshop and management, finance and administration, had a total of 1429 men and 126 women. Of these, seagoing fishing activities involved 1032 men and five women (Vunisea 2021).

The perception that the fisheries sector is a male-dominated sector has led to a degree of "gender blindness" in the tuna longline fisheries sector. This gender blindness means that the post-harvesting and trading activities of women and other areas of work that women could be employed in are often overlooked or neglected in fisheries development, management and planning. As a result, training and assistance programmes are often targeted at men only.

There is also a lack of sex-disaggregated data overall, including on the gendered retail and consumption patterns and the differing constraints on men and women to enable more effective participation of women in the industry. This lack of data on women's roles in offshore fisheries perpetuates the existing assumption that women's interests are taken care

of by men and that women are better off employed in other sectors, and not in the offshore fishing sector (Vunisea 2021).

International awareness of inequitable and often inhumane working conditions in the offshore fishing industry has increased in recent years. This has reached a point where offshore fishing is an industry that has become synonymous with poor working conditions and human rights abuses when compared with other ocean industries like shipping. This is because the activity of fishing itself takes place outside the legal jurisdiction of any nation state, on the "high seas" and within exclusive economic zones (EEZs) where states that have sovereignty have little capability to enforce laws. There are indications that the fishing licensing and control system is vulnerable to corruption, as is the practice of awarding foreign fleets access rights to fishing grounds in developing states and possibly also the system of allowing foreign corporate entities the right to operate a commercial ship register of flag states that are unable or unwilling to enforce their criminal jurisdiction (Vunisea 2021).

The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) has increased its focus on gender equality and social inclusion in offshore fisheries in the last few years. Gender-related policies have been in place in FFA since 2016; however, in recent gender discussion, issues raised included the need to understand the specific barriers faced by women and other marginalised demographic groups in the fisheries supply chain, the need for policies and practices to be more inclusive and for tuna fisheries work to include social inclusion and gender analysis (Vunisea 2021).

In the Pacific Island countries and territories, laws still exist that treat women and girls differently from men and restrict their opportunities and rights in areas such as employment, social protection, sexual harassment in the workplace, decision-making, land ownership, social, health and family status, education, and in constitutional protection (Vunisea 2021).

Findings from desktop research and consultation

- Gender participation in the tuna longline industry in Fiji has specifically been set back by the lack of basic facilities onboard vessels to ensure women's safety and well-being. Sleeping quarters and other amenities are not built to accommodate women. In addition, there are no specific processes and mechanisms to ensure reporting and the proper recording and following up by police of sexual harassment and human rights abuses.
- The industry has been viewed as a male domain, and women joining the industry are expected to live and work within very restrictive situations.
- Cultural perceptions and stereotypes continue to undermine progress that women are making in the industry.
- In the Fiji tuna longline industry, human rights abuse, issues related to contractual agreements and sexual harassment are issues that need to be discussed and addressed. The recent launch of the National Anti-Human Trafficking Strategies and Action Plan (Fiji Times 2021) has shed light on some emerging issues mainly related to forced labour or sexual exploitation that are linked to the fishing industry. Maritime regulations that could address these issues are also in place; however, implementation and enforcement of existing regulations have not been effective.
- In consultations with industry representatives, Fiji Fishing Industry Association highlighted the need for more work on data collection, setting baselines for gender work and the need for cost benefit analysis on the participation of both men and women in the offshore fisheries sector (seagoing).
- Sexual harassment policies for the workplace exist and cover infringement of these regulations within Fiji's EEZ; however, the enforcement and addressing of reported cases has been weak.
- Participation in the industry has positive impacts for both men and women, but the negative impacts are often directly felt by women. Negative aspects that affect the health and wellbeing of women include the increase in a woman's workload and domestic responsibilities when husbands are on long fishing trips, poor working conditions in processing factories, the sex trade, and the related transmission of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, and alcohol and drug abuse.
- Current gender participation at PAFCO, the largest processing plant in Fiji, is 33.5% males and 66.5% females; 88% of females employed at PAFCO work in the processing sector and they make up 46% of support workers. Participation of women in five fishing companies visited in Suva revealed that women predominantly worked in onshore facilities.

Yellowfin tuna ready for processing at Solander Pacific Pte Ltd's processing facility at Mua-i-Walu port, Suva. © Ravai Vafo'ou/WWF-Pacific



- Working conditions at PAFCO have generally improved with the upgrade of the factory since the new partnership agreement with Bumble Bee, although some issues remain in the working conditions of men and women.
- Awareness of the positive and negative impacts of the tuna industry will help in addressing those impacts with a negative effect on women. By highlighting the constraints that restrict the participation of women in the industry, it is envisaged that support will be given to help in the development of opportunities.
- Forced labour and human trafficking of fishers in the fisheries sector is not a new phenomenon; however, increased globalisation, competition, and the mobility of migrant workers have exacerbated the problem. Research into deceptive and coercive labour practices in the fisheries sector is not comprehensive or coordinated.

Recommendations

Several recommendations have emerged from the desktop study and consultations:

- 1) There is need to look at the tuna longline industry holistically, particularly at vessel employment and shore-based employment including maritime surveillance, aerial surveillance, skippers, prosecutors (inshore and offshore), post-harvest activities, processing, value-added activities and local businesses supported by the industry and identify areas where women can participate. All fishing companies should create more jobs within the industry where females can be employed.
- 2) Female crew could be allowed on short fishing trips only (less than two weeks) as a start before moving to longer sea trips. This will allow for safety issues and

other services on board to be trialled for women's participation on longer fishing trips.

- 3) In addition, there is a need to look at how women can access public or private funding for spin-off business opportunities from the tuna industries. A suggestion for state-funded social protection schemes that women can access for funding small business included financial literacy education and loans on small and medium enterprises.
- 4) There is a need for vigorous and systematic collection of gender sex-disaggregated data in the offshore fisheries sector to enable the continuing monitoring of men's and women's engagement in the industry and to have a better grasp of the participation of men and women in the different components of the industry.
- 5) A cost-benefit analysis of women's and men's employment on board should be undertaken to identify other impacts of men being away for long periods of time from families, with the benefits and impacts to be determined and evaluated.
- 6) Opportunities for tuna (value-added) should be explored and the need for a market analysis conducted.

The outcomes of this desktop research and stakeholder consultation tie in with the work that SPC is currently doing and will feed into the development of a regional handbook on gender equity, social inclusion (GSI) and human rights (HR) issues in the Pacific Islands offshore fisheries sector.

The information in this article was sourced from the report 'Gender mainstreaming in Fiji's offshore tuna industry' (Vunisea 2021).

A group discussion on findings of a WWF-led Gender Mainstreaming in the Offshore Fisheries workshop in Lami, Suva. © Ravai Vafo'ou/WWF Pacific





A group discussion on findings of a WWF-led Gender Mainstreaming in the Offshore Fisheries workshop in Lami, Suva. © Ravai Vafo'ou/WWF-Pacific



Gender consultant Aliti Vunisea leading a discussion at the WWF-led Gender Mainstreaming in Offshore Fisheries workshop in Lami. © Jonacani Lalakobau/Fiji Times

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