

Institutional influences on gender roles

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With the increasing emphasis on participatory approaches to marine resource management, community-based management, and stakeholder participation, there is a need to look at gender roles in Pacific Island communities, and understand how institutions and their associated protocols, dictate and influence people's lives. In most Pacific Island countries, people live in communities that are identified by certain levels of groupings (e.g. households, extended households or clans, districts and provinces). These groupings are, in most cases, bound by the customs and practices of several institutions. "Institutions" can refer to traditional or customary institutions, religious institutions and market institutions.

Many Pacific Island societies, for example in Melanesia, have a strong history of defined customary roles, where the division of labour between men and women is clear. Women look after domestic duties, child rearing and food gathering, while men are involved in more physical or perceived harder tasks, such as cutting trees, clearing bushes for gardens, and providing basic food supplies. Men also tend to fish in the outer reef areas, while women mostly fish in inshore areas. Fishing and food gathering activities in many rural Melanesian communities (for example in Fiji and the Solomon Islands) still follow this pattern. But changes in gender roles are occurring in communities near urban areas, and in places where women have paid employment. Traditional institutions can, therefore, define gender work areas and expectations.

In Polynesian countries, there are also defined gender roles, but there is an overlap in what may be described as men's or women's work in households, with men readily cooking during communal gatherings and for the family on Sundays. In Samoa, men are usually responsible for all cooking when there are guests or when there is a large community activity. In Micronesia, women's and men's roles are clearly defined and are nearly similar to those of Polynesia, with men undertaking more physical activities but at the same time taking over some traditionally defined women's duties in household-related activities. In the outer Marshall Islands,

women are mainly involved in making handicrafts and collecting shells for use in handicrafts, while men are involved in invertebrate gathering for daily household consumption.

Where modern market economies exist and where women have paid employment, new household divisions of labour are emerging. Although it could be argued that these changes are minimal and nearly non-existent in many rural situations, it is important to recognise that these changes and barriers to change do exist. Institutions in these instances may encourage change, or could prevent change from occurring if traditional ideals and protocols are strictly followed within the community.

With the coming of modernisation, education and exposure to Western cultures, gender barriers in many contexts are beginning to break down, and it is interesting to note the roles that community-based institutions have on current gender roles. In situations where women are the ones working in paid employment, men have taken over household responsibilities. These roles are usually accepted within the household, but in most cases are not accepted by the community as a whole. The traditionally defined roles of men and women are, in most cases, accepted as the norm because of the important role that traditional and religious institutions play in society. It is not uncommon in some communities for a woman to be rejected by her female relatives for having gone beyond the normal areas of participation and behaviour defined by traditional and religious institutions.

For traditional institutions, strong customary ethics within a community generally relates to both men and women still behaving within customarily defined areas. In addition to taking on new roles — for example seafood marketing — women must still tend to their domestic duties. In this case, fishing is viewed as an extension of a woman's household or care-giver role. Thus, many women live a dual life. Customary expectations in this case clearly define what women can and cannot do. In some cases, a woman might be very strong and independent in a totally foreign setting, such as a work environment;

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but this same women must adhere to and fit within the expected societal norms when back in her community or when participating in communal activities. In near urban areas where many women work, there sometimes exists a work-sharing responsibility in households between men and women. In these cases, women have begun to enjoy various forms of empowerment, including a different status outside the home, the ability to interact and work with other women, and the exposure that enables them to make better informed decisions about the future of their households.

In patrilineal societies, such as in some parts of Fiji and in Malaita and other parts of the Solomon Islands, women are merely users of marine resources in the communities they are married into, because land ownership passes through males only. Here, traditional institutions determine ownership, and access to and use of terrestrial and marine resources. In instances where women have acquired a higher status through marriage, these statuses are withdrawn when the husband dies. The lack of ownership and access to resources directly affects the decision-making process in matters relating to fisheries development and management. Although women often have unique knowledge and skills related to the use of the nearshore coastal zone area, they lack the necessary recognised power to be involved in the decision-making process. There are, however, exceptions to this. For example, Melanesian women of chiefly birth are accorded the same respect and authority as men in their families. So, even within the most traditional Melanesian societies, women of chiefly birth can hold positions of authority.

Religious institutions and ethics also influence gender roles in many Pacific Island countries, and the church is one of the major agents of change. Church and religion is a way of life in the Pacific and any teachings through the church are usually adopted and followed by communities. Many women still perform traditionally defined roles or are bound to perform a modern role at the workplace, and a customary role of domestic duties at home. Religion clearly defines women's tasks and modes of behaviour, which in many cases are accepted without question and followed diligently because they come from religious institutions. The influence of religious institutions is also evident in the way in which people distribute household resources and finances. Some households may forgo educational and other urgent needs for religious obligations and commitments. In an evident shift in power at the community level, religious leaders in some cases are taking over the authority from traditional leaders. This occurs in Samoa and Fiji, where in some areas, pastors and church representatives enjoy a higher status than that accorded to traditional chiefs. In the absence of traditional institutions, reli-

gious groups take over community activities. With regards to resource management, religious institutions have been used as an avenue for awareness raising work.

Protocols and norms associated with all of these institutions also influence fishing patterns at the village level. Traditional obligations — called *oga* in Fiji — are part of the Fijian everyday cultural commitment. For *oga*, people are obliged to give or buy goods appropriate for the occasion or, in most rural coastal locations, such functions mean extensive fishing activities. Samoa has a similar traditional obligation with the *falavelave*, a function where people are expected to contribute. *Falavelave* usually include marriages, deaths and ear piercing, as in Niue and the Cook Islands.

In the context of fisheries, market institutions can include fishers' associations, middle sellers, exporters and buyer groups. These institutions — although small and almost invisible at the community level — have considerable influence in how and what people fish for. Fisheries such as beche-de-mer, trochus, live reef fish and coral are, in most cases, almost always controlled by external institutions. Exporters, buyer groups and middle sellers set prices and determine which species are the most lucrative on the market. People at the community level respond to the demands of external institutions by changing species, fishing patterns, and their involvement in fishing to meet these demands. The demand sometimes results in intense fishing participation for certain periods of time, resulting in fishers changing fishing patterns and focusing on market demands. In many Pacific Island countries, access to marine resources must be granted from customary owners. Buyers and exporters liaise directly with resource owners and not with the Fisheries Department or the authorities responsible for the sustainable exploitation of marine resources.

Market institutions and the demand they exert on fishers at the community level result in changes in gender roles within fishing communities. Where there is demand for a certain species, both men and women may participate in the fishing and selling of the product. An example is the increased involvement of both men and women in the beche-de-mer trade. In other situations, men may take on commercial fishing activities, leaving woman to fish for home consumption (although there are instances where women may be the ones involved in commercial fishing).

All of these institutions have, over time, changed their focus and leadership patterns. And while community participation is important in modern fisheries development and management, it is also important to take note of these institutions and

their functions and influences on society. In any traditional community setting, it is important to work with one or more of these institutions.

What does this mean for marine resource management? Identifying stakeholders for the purpose of project development should also include identifying and ranking institutions. Pacific Islanders strongly identify with certain institutions, and so it is necessary to work within these organisations when trying to implement marine resource management measures.

Another challenge is to determine how far an institution should be allowed to influence fisheries development and management interventions at the community level. Religious institutions have a strong influence on men's, women's and youth groups, sometimes overtaking traditional insti-

tutions. In other cases, where new church groups have come into rural communities, there are often conflicts within communities, and people may shift away from traditional knowledge, skills and traditional ties. Consequently, new groups at the community level emerge, with traditional institutions and traditionally defined roles overlapping with new religious groupings.

For successful marine resource management, it is necessary to identify existing institutions within the community, and to maximise the use of such institutions to the best advantage. These institutions also provide the key contact for community people to external partners. Equal efforts should be given to promoting marine environmental awareness at the community level and, more importantly, to those that operate the institutions that govern marine resources.