

Barriers and constraints to gender equality and social inclusion of women sellers in municipal markets in Fiji

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Introduction

Historically, institutional and systematic discrimination against women and girls has long been existent in every sphere of society thus severely impacting their lived realities. The Pacific Islands region has had its fair share of challenges with addressing gender disparities in key areas, including women's participation in decision-making and leadership, access to education, and in particular, regards to this article, the issue of women's access to economic opportunities and employment.

In Pacific Island markets, 75–90% of vendors are women, and their earnings often make up a significant portion of household incomes in the informal sector. Despite this, women are often excluded from market governance and decision-making. The 'Markets for Change' project run by United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) addresses barriers and constraints to women's economic empowerment.³ The project 'aims to ensure that marketplaces in rural and urban areas of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are safe, inclusive and non-discriminatory, promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment'. These efforts include extending and expanding existing market buildings, in some cases rebuilding entire new municipal markets and accommodation centres for rural market vendors, water and sanitation provisions, which have resulted in greater women's representation in market forums, and communicating issues to relevant authorities. As a result of the Markets for Change project, women have both increased sales and their representation on market committees. They have also been vocal to ensure their needs are heard and met when it comes to allocating market fees to improve economic opportunity, and the safety, health and wellbeing of market vendors.

In Fiji this project has, to date, only engaged with women selling fresh produce, mainly fresh fruits and vegetables, while those selling seafood have not been covered under the project. This is despite the substantial contribution of coastal fisheries to household nutritional security and income. However, these contributions are often overlooked, underestimated and/or undervalued (Chapman 1987; Weeraratne et al. 2010; FAO 2017). As a result, technical and funding support tends to be focused on male fishers. Preliminary results from a national baseline socioeconomic study of indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*) women in the inshore fisheries sector shows that 44% of women fish for income,

a significant increase from previous work on Fijian women in the fisheries sector (Thomas et al. in prep.).

In early 2018, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) partnered with UN Women, the Ministry for Local Government, and three municipal councils (Suva, Labasa and Savusavu) to undertake a study aimed at improving gender equality and social inclusion of women seafood vendors in municipal markets in Fiji.

Specific objectives of the study were to:

- better understand the barriers and constraints faced by (and the needs of) women seafood market vendors;
- provide information that will assist policy-makers in creating policy that is aligned with the needs of women seafood vendors;
- assess women's level of dependency on selling seafood at markets; and
- understand women's decision-making power regarding their seafood sales at markets.

Methodology

Socioeconomic questionnaires were designed by fisheries and gender specialists from WCS and UN Women to gain information on the selling habits of women, their needs in terms of being able to safely sell at the market, their level of decision-making power, the barriers they face and their needs. The survey was tested on women seafood vendors in a local village prior to implementation in three markets across Fiji. There were two versions of the one-on-one survey: one for fishers (those women who caught the seafood themselves) and one for middlewomen (women who purchased the seafood from someone else to

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sell). The interviews were conducted in the respondent's preferred language (*iTaukei*, Hindi or English), and attempts were made to interview around one-half (at the larger markets) to three-fourths (at the smaller markets) of the women seafood vendors at each of the study markets. The questions were carefully translated through a collective discussion among interviewers who both understood and spoke the varying distinct dialects of *iTaukei* women. Although Bauan is the common dialect among *iTaukei*, it is critical to understand that some *iTaukei* women are more comfortable speaking other *iTaukei* dialects. This was an important methodological component to ensure that the questions were clear and that the interviewee was comfortable in understanding what was being asked of her and could, therefore, respond with the full extent of her knowledge.

Preliminary discussions were held with each of the councils to get background information on the market such as how many women sold seafood (both cooked varieties

and live catches) there, on which days of the week, and their availability to meet with WCS staff for an interview. One-on-one surveys and focal group discussions were held with women sellers at the Savusavu and Labasa municipal markets from 6 to 10 November 2018. Questions presented to the women seafood vendors related to when and how long they have utilised the market space, how much they pay in market levies, what has been their experience with earning an income from their sales, and the challenges they encountered at various stages of their business. A short summary of the women interviewed is shown in Table 1.

Surveys will be held at the Suva Municipal Market in January 2019. Once completed, a report will be prepared for sharing with municipal councils to help guide efforts to improve facilities and market spaces for seafood vendors in partnership with UN Women.

Table 1. Summary of the women sellers interviewed.

Locations	# Women	Ethnic composition	Age (yr)	Education levels	Marital status
Savusavu	7	<i>iTaukei</i> (71%) Indo-Fijian (29%)	31–38	Both primary and secondary schools	Married (57%) Widowed (29%) Single (14%)
Labasa	26	<i>iTaukei</i> (100%)	23–69	Both primary and secondary schools	Married (88%) Widowed (4%) Single (8%)

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