

Marshallese women and environmental change: Their role and power in resource management

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Marshallese women play an important role in the development and well-being of their families and communities, especially through the wise use of resources. Climate change, however, is presenting new challenges to women's performance of this role. The effects of climate change on natural resources, within the context of longstanding environmental and societal challenges in the Marshall Islands, are making it harder for women to meet the needs of their households, especially in rural areas. A compounding factor is the low level of representation of women in the public sphere, especially in relation to decision-making for environmental management. This research draws on the women, culture, and development (WCD) paradigm to analyse semi-structured interviews with Marshallese women on their experiences, practices and observations about their environment, society and economy, including their roles in decision-making processes around resource management. The incorporation of the WCD paradigm into this study has allowed women's stories to be reflected through a culture lens that illustrates how society and tradition has provided the structure and values that shape ideas about how women should live in contemporary society.

Introduction

A significant body of socioeconomic literature has established the importance of equitable participation of women and men in development projects and environmental governance (e.g. Agarwal 2010; Arora-Jonsson 2013; MacGregor 2010; Alston 2014). Despite this, women continue to be under-represented at all levels of governance while also experiencing discrimination and unequal opportunity in almost all sectors of development. In the Marshall Islands, overpopulation, urbanisation, commercialisation, and poor waste management and pollution – impacts that are being exacerbated by climate change – have resulted in the deterioration of the natural environment. At the same time, climate change is leading to increasing temperatures, droughts, and rising sea levels (and, thus, saltwater inundation), threatening food security and water resources, all of which affect the health and livelihoods of Marshallese people (RMI Government 2016). Once refracted through the lens of the economic, social, and political contexts of the Marshall Islands, these issues reveal their gender-specific implications. According to the 2018 Gender Assessment report by the Marshall Islands Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs, “women are more vulnerable than men to the effects of humanitarian crises, such as events related to climate change” (RMI Government 2018:11). This is due mostly to Marshallese women's reliance on natural resources for sustaining the livelihoods of their families and communities. While existing studies have opened the discussion on environmental change and its effects on women – as well as the gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability and adaptation, and the extent of women's involvement in decision-making on resource management in specific locations – there has been no scholarly analyses of these issues focused specifically on the Marshall Islands. My dissertation addresses this gap in the literature through a study of women's past and current roles in the Marshall Islands in terms of resource management.

Unlike earlier approaches established to address the exclusion of women in development,² the WCD paradigm argues that,

in the twenty-first century, the failure of development in the Third World comes from the lack of awareness of culture being an experience of life (Bhavnani et al. 2016). Centering the links between women, culture and development can make visible women's important role and offer a powerful way to challenge the subordination and oppression of women that are being shaped by capitalism, patriarchy, race and ethnicity. The current policies and development theories being used are highly focused on the economy. Bhavnani and Bywater (2009) argue that the exclusion and marginalisation of women from development projects, with little attention to the place of culture and its impact on gender inequalities in society, have simultaneously contributed to widespread environmental degradation and resource depletion. Although modern policies and projects in development integrate women, they fail to do so in a way that sheds light on their roles and responsibilities in daily life. A WCD approach to development seeks to place women as an integral part of a sustainable and equitable society by maintaining a focus on moving towards justice and equality, while recognising the importance of economics (Bhavnani and Bywater 2009).

My research examines the implications of environmental degradation for women; specifically, whether women's vulnerability through a loss of access to resources not only reflects pre-existing gender inequalities but exacerbates them as well. Inequalities in the ownership of household assets and rising familial burdens due to declining food and water resources – as well as societal modernisation, and increased exposure to climate-induced disasters – can have negative implications for women's ability to economically support themselves, enhance human capital, and maintain the health and well-being of their families and themselves. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by environmental change and disaster impacts, making their participation and leadership critical for an all-of-society approach to building the resilience of families, communities and nations. This is especially true given Marshallese women's well-recognised resilience in times of disaster (RMI Government 2018).

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² The field of “women and development” is marked by the following theoretical approaches: Women in Development; Women and Development; Women, Environment and Development; and Gender and Development – all of which have contributed much to gender mainstreaming in development. They all lack, however, an understanding of culture and its influence on society.



A woman using a throw net to catch dinner. ©Tonie K. Kattie-deBrum

The problem

My five-year career with the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) – first working as an intern and now as a permanent employee – has both exposed me to the “luxurious”³ urban life in Majuro and the simple living in the rural outer islands. It is during this time that I noted and understood the inherent differences between the two types of communities. The obvious distinction is the significant influence of Western culture and social norms in the densely populated capital, where a concoction of traditional and modern ideals flourish. Meanwhile, communities in the less populated outer islands – who are somewhat influenced by Western ideals – prefer and cherish simplicity. Unfortunately for those in rural areas, with modernity comes the challenge of “keeping up” to a fast and ever-changing world. The abrupt alterations in both the environment and society have left fishermen, farmers and handicraft makers trailing behind, with some failing to adapt.

I am tasked to note and assess the threats against the natural resources that are necessary for the livelihoods of these communities. In order for this process – referred to as *reimaanlok*⁴ – to properly take place, the full participation of the community is required because their knowledge of their surroundings and use of resources is the prime information used. Sadly, an issue I have often encountered is the reluctance of women to join discussions. Women seldom speak in community meetings. Even in cases where certain responsibilities are designated to them, the women feel disinclined to participate and often do not take part at all. In circumstances such as environmental degradation, where rural women are likely to be disproportionately affected, the question I am left with is why they do not feel obliged to share their opinions. What are the gender norms and stereotypes in Marshallese society that influence this behaviour, and is this lack of participation a reflection of currently accepted practices? What do women’s lack of participation mean in the context of resource management and climate adaptation where the socioeconomic literature demonstrates the importance of women’s participation in decision-making?

The 2018 Gender Equality Assessment of the Marshall Islands states that because of traditional beliefs, stemming from colonial times, as well as women’s customary roles as mothers and nurturers – and their coexistence with contradictory gender stereotypes (universal stereotypes juxtaposed by local stereotypes stemming from traditional beliefs) – the initial roles of women as decision-makers have been shifted

³ Majuro and other urban areas have certain amenities, opportunities, and easy access to resources in comparison to rural areas in the Marshall Islands.

⁴ The term “*reimaanlok*”, or looking to the future, was developed in 2007 to fill the need for a conservation area planning framework. The *reimaanlok* programme provides a step-by-step guide that Marshallese coastal communities can use to establish and manage community-based conservation areas.





Woman preparing dried pandanus for later use in handicrafts. ©Tonie K. Kattie-deBrum

to the men (RMI Government 2018). These stereotypes have since placed women in the private sphere, while men are expected to occupy the public space and be breadwinners. It is generally common in contemporary RMI society that leadership and decision-making positions are male roles (RMI Government 2018). This research sought to shed light on the gender inequities in Marshallese society in order to initiate discussions on the development of policies that will ensure women's equitable representation in decision-making on resource management.

Dependence on the natural environment

As Marshallese society further evolves, the surrounding physical environment is changing along with it. Social, economic, technological and cultural forces have been the main drivers of environmental change (Leenders et al. 2017), leading to an ever-increasing birth rate and continued migration from the outer islands into already crowded urban centres; not only altering the landscape, but putting further pressures on the economy and social environment. Staying in rural areas does not offer a better choice. Current environmental issues such as sea level rise, increasing temperature, and drier seasons have resulted in declining natural resources. And with the onset of climate change, these issues are being further exacerbated (RMI Government 2016) and are already threatening scarce resources (such as water) and is affecting food security, human health and the livelihoods of numerous communities.

I conducted my research over a seven-month period. The first three months were spent in the Marshall Islands where available and relevant data were collected from select organisations. This initial study phase was carried out in order to first understand the gender context in the Marshall Islands. This was done by examining gender roles in the home and in the community, and then exploring gender dependencies and preferences regarding resources. Government and non-governmental agencies involved in this study were able to provide information in the form of reports, which were used for factual information. These reports describe current changes in the environment (e.g. effects, post-disaster projects), as well as socioeconomic data, country demographics, environmental and social assessments, and gender-based research

that highlights women's personal struggles with environmental change. The information collected provided an empirical base for this study, which is also supported by social science studies focused on natural resource management, gender studies, and feminist research. These papers were found through the University of Waikato library database.

The second phase of the research involved a qualitative study of women's experiences in the outer islands of the Marshall Islands. This consisted of informal interviews with five women from Lae and Ujae atolls (two-thirds of the Kabinnemeto cluster located north of Kwajelein Atoll). Both Lae and Ujae, along with the rest of the northern Marshall Islands were severely impacted during the 2015–2016 El Niño event.⁵ Both communities are rather small and consisted mainly of low-income families.

Key findings and discussion

Gender differences in roles and responsibilities

My research revealed the evolution of men's and women's roles. Before modernisation, men worked mostly outdoors, building, fishing and performing other strenuous, physical activities. Women, on the other hand, tended to household chores and were responsible for taking care of children, as well as collecting firewood, planting small crops, collecting seashells and harvesting plant materials for handicrafts, collecting water from wells or other sources, and ensuring food was prepared. Living in a matrilineal society meant that the women were held in high respect and known to uphold the roles of a caretaker, nurturer, benefactress and peacemaker. It was not until profit seekers arrived in the 1500s that the Marshallese understood the concept of wealth. When traders introduced a cash economy that would have an impact on previously balanced gender roles, men were quick to take offers to make a profit, such as in the production and selling of copra. The arrival of the missionaries in 1857 further cemented women's roles as domestic labourers, as those roles pertained to the Christian family ideals of the missionaries. As easily as the Marshallese absorbed the Christian religion, so did they also accept its patriarchal values, including those that insisted women should be obedient to their male

⁵ Towards the end of 2015 and a couple months into 2016, the Marshall Islands experienced extremely low precipitation and one of the most intense El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events, which resulted in extreme drought. By May 2016, almost 21,000 Marshallese were affected, including 1257 households in the outer islands and 5195 households in urban areas (Leenders et al. 2017).



Another representation of an Land Resources Committee with mostly male attendees. ©Tonie K. Kattie-deBrum

counterparts and tend to the home, while the men worked outside the household.

The next century saw a transformation in the islands' economy and society. After the United States takeover of the archipelago at the end of World War II, the Marshallese further adopted Westernised views. What was left of the original culture evolved to adapt to post-nuclear livelihoods, globalisation, and eventually to the pressures of modernisation and being recognised as an independent nation in 1989. The new government brought new decision-making positions and, since then, the mixed parliamentary system of the Marshall Islands has been dominated by men. The lack of female representation in the public sphere influenced the development of policies to ameliorate discrimination and encourage gender mainstreaming. Since then, however, and with the onset of global efforts in women's empowerment, women have managed to get a foot in the door, expanding their educational horizons, and acquiring decision-making positions and other "proper" jobs. This is, at least, the outcome for women in urban areas.

Women and environmental change

Farther away from the bustling towns, supermarkets, and nine-to-five workdays, the lifestyles of rural Marshallese women still consist of much of what is considered "traditional" roles and customs. Rural women are still largely responsible for the health and well-being of their family, especially that of their children and older persons. Unfortunately, modernisation in the Marshall Islands has led to an array of issues such as overpopulation, urbanisation, commercialisation, poor waste management and pollution. Combined with the onset of climate change, these global and local issues have led to environmental degradation. Climate change has led to increasing temperatures, droughts and rising sea levels, which threaten food security, ruin water resources, and affect the health and livelihoods of Marshallese people. Women, especially those in rural areas, are most affected by these changes due to their limited resources. In the outer islands, women depend heavily on the sale of their handicrafts for money; money that is used to buy food, school supplies and other personal necessities. During periods of drought, not

only do wells and food crops dry up, but so do the resources necessary for handicraft production. This situation leaves communities with few options to secure their well-being. Marshallese women are recognised for their resilience in times of disaster and finding solutions to problems. However, despite society subconsciously looking to women to fix problems, women's representation in decision-making positions – especially in outer island councils – is miniscule, due to traditional beliefs and gender stereotypes that have shifted women's earlier decision-making roles to men.

What my research has revealed is that the past concept of seeing society as having two different social spheres – public and private, with each complementing the other's roles – is no longer reflective of separate powers between the two. Rather, it has become a way to keep the other at bay. In the urban setting, men continue to ascend the social and political ladder, while discussions on "keeping the culture" is strictly in reference to women. Fortunately for Marshallese women living in urban areas, their awareness of the evolution of the global political environment and access to resources keeps them informed, even to the extent of attempting to challenge oppressive and unequal behaviour by adopting national policies for gender equality. Rural women, on the other hand, who live off the grid and are disconnected from global issues are unaware of the changes that are taking place in the world beyond their immediate environment. They are nevertheless aware of changes that they physically experience, which leaves them the most vulnerable to environmental change. Ione de Brum, Mayor of Ebon Atoll, emphasised that urban women have an easier time adapting because they are well accustomed to change in Marshallese society (pers. comm.). She also added that they are the most prepared for worst-case-scenarios of environmental change.

A double-edged sword

The roles culturally prescribed for men and women often shape the nature of their relationship, and the work they have to do with the material environment around them. At the same time, those roles may also be part of the problem because certain ideas about women's place being in the private and not public sphere are embedded within them. In



A typical Local Resources Committee created by the community to progress resource management discussions. ©Tonie K. Kattie-deBrum

historical times, before the Marshall Islands became part of a monetised, global and capitalistic economy, these roles and the relationships men and women had with the environment functioned within a socioeconomically subsistent context where it was possible to have a certain degree of equity. Fast-forward to a postcolonial modern era and the economy now functions within a global and capitalistic system, into which men are financially interwoven but women are excluded. In conclusion, most Marshallese men today have money and power, including political power in the country's political institutions, which they did not have in precolonisation days.

“The idea that women work the home, makes it impossible for women to access cash. And when they do, their male family members or their partner would dictate what that money is used for... Financial abuse towards women is also prevalent.” (Kathryn Relang, former Director of Women United Together Marshall Islands, pers. comm.)

A mother's burden

In the Marshall Islands, women are still expected to continue to fulfil their gender roles despite having lost out in terms of modernity. The reason why this situation is a concern today is because the differential gender roles and relationships in terms of using the environment have, in the modern era, translated into women being significantly disadvantaged or disempowered. The concern becomes obvious when observed through the lens of contemporary environmental change, especially climate change, because when the environment is destroyed and resources are unavailable or unusable, that situation puts greater stress on families and on communities, thereby leaving women to be responsible for the well-being of both, and to bear the brunt of that stress.

Recommendations for the future

The Marshall Islands does not exist within a vacuum. The country is very much a part of the global capitalistic economic system. In this system, both a cash economy and a subsistence economy exist. Yet women remain predominantly within the subsistence sphere, mainly as a result of historical gender roles and cultural values. Marshallese women lack a presence in the public sphere, while men dominate the public space. All of that translates into a situation where women remain disempowered.

Without appropriate representation in the public space, Marshallese women lose the opportunity to wield power or agency that comes with equitable access to all of these spaces – both private and public. At least with the addition of select women's groups, there is an entry point for progress. However, societal doubts about women's capabilities and a refusal to allow them to exercise agency denies women an opportunity to play an integral role in problem solving, and the weight of tradition seems to be a barrier. This is concerning when considering the environmental and climatic changes that are happening and may continue to happen at more intense levels, further exacerbating the conditions in which people live, which will adversely affect women much more than men.

The Marshall Islands has adopted a selection of developmental programmes to address gender inequalities and injustices against women's rights. These include: the National Policy on Gender Mainstreaming (2015), the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (2016), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other regional and global efforts. The Marshall Islands also provides opportunities for empowerment. The implementation of existing charters and policies may prove effective in transforming women's place in society, especially when these policies and projects are supported by global entities such as the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme, which advocate for women's rights and representation. Marshallese women are an integral part of society. Their place at home and in the community is the rudder that steers the family. If Marshallese society prefers to continue moving forward alongside the rest of the world, mothers as rudders need updates in the form of proper mindsets, improved capacity, and a louder and more prominent voice in all aspects of development in order to further propel the country towards longevity and resilience.

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