Addressing barriers and constraints to gender equality and social inclusion of women seafood sellers in municipal markets in Fiji

Bulou Vitukawalu1, Sangeeta Mangubhai, Violeta Berdejo, Mosese Naleba, Yashika Nand and Preeya Ieli

Introduction

Fisheries are critical to food security and the livelihoods of coastal-dwelling communities throughout the Pacific region (Bell et al. 2009). Women play significant roles in fisheries and are often considered as primary income supporters for households, as they are increasingly engaged in a wide diversity of activities such as gleaning, fishing, post-harvesting processing, selling and marketing of value-added products (Kronen and Vunisea 2009). However, in most cases, women are often marginalised and/or are under-recognised for the contribution and important roles they play in the fisheries sector (FAO 2017). This partly stems from the misconstrued perception that fishing is a man’s domain and is perpetuated by failure to sex-disaggregate data or gather any data at all from women fishers (Pacific Community 2018). About 75‒90% of vendors at Pacific Island markets are women, and their earnings significantly contribute to household incomes in the informal sector (https://unwomen.org.au/newsroom/spotlight/markets-for-change/).

The “Markets for Change” project run by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) aims to address the barriers and constraints to women’s economic empowerment (https://unwomen.org.au/our-work/projects/safer-markets/). The project objectives are “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 providing adequate water and sanitation, extending existing market buildings (in some cases, rebuilding entire new municipal markets and accommodation centres for rural market vendors), providing sufficient spaces and strengthening women’s engagement in market forums. Through the programme, women have increased sales and their representation on market committees, and are able to better communicate their needs to relevant authorities.

From 2018 to 2019, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in collaboration with UN Women, the Ministry for Local Government and three municipal councils (Suva, Labasa and Savusavu) undertook a study aimed at addressing barriers to women’s economic empowerment by improving gender equality and social inclusion of women seafood vendors in municipal markets in Fiji (Gavidi et al. 2019). Specific objectives of the study were to:

- document the level of dependency of women selling seafood at markets;
- recognise women’s decision-making power regarding their seafood sales at markets;
- address the barriers and constraints faced by women seafood market vendors; and
- provide information that will assist policymakers in creating policy that is aligned with the needs of women seafood vendors.

Methodology

This study involved a socio-economic survey with the questionnaire designed by fisheries and gender specialists from the WCS and UN Women. The survey documented women vendors’ decision-making power, the level of dependency on selling seafood at the markets, constraints faced and how these women sellers’ needs could be best met. Prior to implementation in three municipal markets in Fiji, the survey was tested on women seafood vendors in a local village. One-on-one surveys were held with both fisherwomen and middlewomen in their preferred language (iTaukei, Hindi or English). The surveys were carried out in the following municipals markets: Savusavu (6–10 November 2018), Labasa (6–10 November 2018, 11–14 April 2019), and in Suva (18 May 2019, 21–22 June 2019).

Questions presented to the women seafood sellers included how long had they been dependent on this livelihood, how much income did they generate from seafood sales, who made the decisions in income earned, what was their time investment in selling seafood and what were the constraints faced while selling at municipal markets. WCS also designed a “market observation logbook” to collect data on market facilities and infrastructure being used by women, and the types and quantities of seafood being sold. This information was used to support and validate responses by vendors regarding market conditions and their needs. All financial figures in this report are in Fijian dollars.

Results and discussion

Demographics

Women sellers interviewed across the three municipal markets were from diverse backgrounds of iTaukei and Indo-Fijian descent, with age groups ranging from 22 to 70 (Table 1). They comprised both fisherwomen and middlewomen. At the Suva market, a total of 38 fisherwomen and 41 middlewomen took part in the survey, while 25 fisherwomen and 22 middlewomen at the Labasa market were interviewed. Women sellers interviewed at the Savusavu market were all

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Emperors are popular species sold by women at municipal markets in Fiji. ©Sangeeta Mangubhai, WCS

Mud crabs and prawns sold at the Labasa Market. ©Sangeeta Mangubhai, WCS
middlewomen, as fisherwomen normally sell at the market on an irregular basis. The majority of these women sellers across all markets were married and a small portion were either single or widowed. Education levels for these sellers varied, with some women having either primary or secondary education, while only a few women from the Labasa and Suva markets had some form of tertiary education.

**Seafood sales at the market**

Women vendors sell a wide range of seafood (fish species and non-fish species) at the market. The mud crab (*qari*) and the emperor fish (*Lethrinus* spp.) were common species sold across the three markets (Table 2). It was also found that less than half of the women vendors interviewed (in Suva and Labasa markets) sold cooked seafood products, with the most popular items being fish, octopus (*kuita*) and seaweed (*lumi*). The majority of women vendors invest a lot of their time in selling their products at the market, with an average of seven to eight hours spent in selling. The average time in travelling to markets is one to two hours, with most of these women stating that they would stay until all their seafood was sold. Across all three markets, the majority of the seafood vendors (>50%) sold at the market by themselves, with a small portion of women selling seafood with either their husband or children. The most preferred days for selling for most women vendors were Fridays and Saturdays, as there was an increase in number of customers, hence an increase in sales. In terms of the market levy, women vendors paid an average market fee of FJD 1.19/day (Savusavu market), FJD 1.84/day (Labasa market), and FJD 3.50/day (Suva market). None of the women vendors interviewed sold to exporters, restaurants, hotels or shops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th># Women</th>
<th>Ethnic composition</th>
<th>Age (yr)</th>
<th>Education levels</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Savusavu</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>iTaukei (71%) Indo-Fijian (29%)</td>
<td>31–58</td>
<td>Both primary and secondary school</td>
<td>Married (57%) Widowed (29%) Single (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labasa</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>iTaukei (100%)</td>
<td>23–69</td>
<td>Primary, secondary and tertiary level</td>
<td>Married (88%) Widowed (4%) Single (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suva</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>iTaukei (100%)</td>
<td>22–70</td>
<td>Primary, secondary and tertiary level</td>
<td>Married (81.6%) Widowed (13.2%) Single (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Income and sales

There is a high dependency on selling fish and other invertebrates in all the three markets surveyed, with a large portion of women stating that selling seafood was either their main source of income or only source of income. Women seafood vendors made average weekly earnings between FJD 146 and FJD 600 across all three markets (Fig. 1), and the majority stated they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the earnings made from selling seafood. However, a smaller proportion of the women interviewed explained that income earned was not as reliable, as there was an increase in competition with other vendors (especially those selling the same seafood types), there was not enough space in the market to sell seafood, seafood prices fluctuated accordingly and there were increased expenses for family and village functions. Income generated through seafood sales was used for food, household expenses, children’s education, church events and village functions, etc.

Decision-making

Women vendors were asked a series of questions to determine how much decision-making power they had when it came to “what they fished for”, “whether they sell at the market or not”, “how often they sell at markets” and “how they spent their income”. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the majority of the women interviewed (>50%) made decisions by themselves, while a few shared the decisions with their spouse or with another family member. These results suggest that many of the women vendors interviewed were the main decision-makers; however, there are a significant number of women who value others’ advice/feedback on the type of decision they make in regard to their livelihood sources that include income and expenses.
Table 2. List of fish species and non-fish species sold by women seafood vendors at the Suva, Labasa and Savusavu municipal markets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Markets</th>
<th>Top 3 fish species sold</th>
<th>Top 3 non-fish species sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Savusavu</td>
<td>Longjaw mackerel (<em>Rastrelliger kanagurta</em>)</td>
<td>Mud crab (<em>Scylla serrata</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coral grouper (<em>Plectropomus leopardus</em>)</td>
<td>Prawns (<em>Macrobrachium</em> spp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yellowtail emperor (<em>Lethrinus atkinsoni</em>)</td>
<td>Lobsters (<em>Panulirus</em> spp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labasa</td>
<td>Thumbprint emperor (<em>Lethrinus harak</em>)</td>
<td>Saltwater mussels (<em>Anadara</em> spp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Camouflage grouper (<em>Epinephelus polypekadion</em>)</td>
<td>Seagrapples (<em>Caulerpa racemosa</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yellowfin surgeonfish (<em>Acanthurus xanhopterus</em>)</td>
<td>Mud crab (<em>Scylla serrata</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suva</td>
<td>Thumbprint emperor (<em>Lethrinus harak</em>)</td>
<td>Seagrapples (<em>Caulerpa racemosa</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mullet (<em>Crenimugil crenilabis</em>)</td>
<td>Mud crab (<em>Scylla serrata</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rabbitfish (<em>Siganus vermiculatus</em>)</td>
<td>Saltwater mussels (<em>Anadara</em> spp.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Average weekly earnings for women seafood vendors across the three municipal markets.

Figure 2. Decision-making power for fisherwomen.

Figure 3. Decision-making power for middlewomen.
Barriers, issues and needs

Barriers, issues, and needs identified through individual interviews with all women vendors are summarised as follows. These were common issues across the three markets surveyed.

- **Space availability and allocation**: A vast majority of the women across the three markets stated that limitations on sufficient space was a barrier to selling seafood. In most cases, women vendors were provided a disproportionate distribution of space, and were required to sit very close to each other in a congested space and/or were asked to share a designated space with other vendors.

- **Poor or inadequate market conditions**: The issue of improper shelters, poor drainage, unhygienic toilets, poor stall conditions, lack of water facilities and lack of tables and chairs have become a growing concern for most of these vendors across all three markets. Many women shared their experiences on how the unavailability of proper shelters would affect their sales and leave them vulnerable, especially during adverse weather conditions. Also, the lack of proper tables and seats have resulted in women using plastics, tarpaulin and cardboard to put their seafood on, with many relying on wooden boxes and drums on which to sit.

- **Lack of information**: Knowledge of municipal bylaws was very low, particularly for women vendors in the Suva and Labasa municipal markets, with few women stating they received information from the respective town/city councils either through noticeboards or through public announcement systems. However, the majority of these women preferred to receive information through word of mouth (>50%). Types of information vendors were interested in included information on fisheries bans, new legislation that affected them as vendors and new laws that could affect their source of income.

- **Communicating their needs**: A number of women stated they were not comfortable being vocal and sharing their issues and needs verbally or in writing with the respective town/city councils. They stated they were afraid that if they raised their issues or made complaints, they may not be allowed to sell their seafood at the markets. Others stated that the council never responded to their complaints or problems.

- **Access to training**: A number of women highlighted they would like to be trained on how to preserve their seafood to prevent spoilage and in business planning including how to earn more from selling their seafood. However, they did not know how to access these types of trainings.

Recommendations

A number of key recommendations are made as a result of this study.

- **Provision of sufficient space and its equal distribution among vendors** is a critical issue that needs to be addressed by the respective town/city councils.

- **There is an urgent need to improve the overall hygiene and infrastructure across all three markets and to provide women vendors with quality facilities** (e.g. tables, seats, clean toilets, electricity, proper shelters, adequate roofing, good drainage, proper rubbish disposals and clean water supplies).

- **Relevant information on market issues or new market of fisheries laws** should be disseminated to market vendors verbally, and face to face if possible, by the respective town/city council.

- **Implementing training programmes on seafood preservation methods for vendors** is crucial. This is to ensure that customers are provided with seafood that meets Fiji’s safety standards.

Conclusion

There is a high dependency on selling fish and other invertebrates for women vendors across the three markets surveyed. The survey captured how devoted women are in the fisheries sector in terms of post-harvest process, sales and marketing of their seafood products. It also shows the important role women play in their household in terms of providing additional income for their families, thus it is crucial that women’s engagement in the fisheries sector is strengthened and supported. Women are becoming the main decision-makers when it comes to earning a livelihood. Lastly, barriers and constraints faced by women vendors need to be addressed to achieve gender equality and promote women’s economic empowerment.

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References


