

# The significance of traditional practices in the Lau Islands, Fiji, and their importance to women for sustainable protection and production

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## Introduction

Traditional knowledge is an important background foundation that refers to the knowledge, innovation and practices of Indigenous peoples and local communities around the world. Turner and Berkes (2006) define traditional knowledge as a body of knowledge rooted within a group of people across generations of close contact with nature and, including, beliefs held by local people. This connectivity evolves by adapting to local environmental circumstances and is handed down through generations by different forms of cultural transmission (Berkes 2009; Berkes and Berkes 2009). Traditional knowledge includes knowledge and practices concerning food, medicine, hunting, fishing, agriculture, home gardening, handicraft making and other skills developed to sustain the local population (Veitayaki 1997; Siwatibau 1984; Luetz and Nunn 2020).

On the same note, biocultural diversity comprises the variability of biological species and ecosystems, and the distinctiveness of cultural groups that interact with these resources (Cocks 2006; Berkes 2009; Berkes and Berkes 2009). In fact, traditional knowledge and biocultural diversity are interwoven and are essential components to ensure the sustainable development of communities living in traditional settings (Braton 1989; Agrawal and Gibson 1999).

Despite the importance of traditional knowledge, its erosion has been observed in many communities across different countries due to sociopolitical changes and development pressures, marketisation and commodification (Pilgrim et al. 2007; Turner and Turner 2007; Singh et al. 2009). It is important to assess the value of biocultural diversity and associated traditional knowledge in relation to learning and conservation (Berkes 2009; Berkes and Berkes 2009) while protecting the intellectual property rights of communities (Singh et al. 2009; Singh and Srivastava 2009). The growing need to conserve traditional knowledge and biocultural diversity is now widely recognised and of growing concern (Pretty 2003, 2007; Pilgrim et al. 2007).

In Fiji, women in most rural regions are the major subsistence producers and small-scale marketers of food and handicrafts. Fijian women do most of the day-to-day subsistence fishing (one of the two highest fisheries sector contributors to gross domestic product) in most coastal and riverine areas (Gillett 2009). Women are also significant contributors to non-fish capture and marketing within the small-scale commercial fishing sector (Thomas et al. 2021). Improvements planned for rural infrastructure will benefit women, but pressure on inshore marine resources due to overexploitation and destructive fishing methods threatens the sustainability of

women's fisheries and, therefore, household food security. Most Fijian handicrafts, especially those produced by women, cannot compete in terms of price with imported or local factory-made souvenirs sold in tourism centres, thus depriving Fijian women of an important economic opportunity.

The women of Lau Province are well known throughout Fiji for their rich cultural and traditional practices that have sustainably supported their livelihoods. In addition, Lau women are committed to maintaining their traditional obligations and upholding their general commitment to preserving sustainable livelihoods. With the underpinning goal of integrating traditional knowledge with biocultural diversity, the Lau Seascape Initiative – through Conservation International – has engaged directly with Lau women to document the diversity of their traditional cultural practices and recording and documenting these practices for the purpose of economic and social benefit.

This article reports on the outputs and outcomes of the Gender Inclusion Consultation with women of the four districts that the Lau Seascape team in Ono, Vulaga, Kabara and Moce covered from 4 to 18 December 2021.

## Background

In 2013, Conservation International began working with the traditional leaders of Lau Province (*Masi ni Vanua o Lau*) to protect the ecosystems of Fiji's Lau Islands. The Lau Seascape is now a multi-partner initiative, comprising the Lau community and Indigenous representatives, the Government of Fiji, the private sector, and non-governmental



Women of Kabara with their handicrafts. ©Isimeli Loganimoce

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Women's group, Doi Village in Ono. ©Isimeli Loganimoce

organisation stakeholders. The Lau Seascope focuses on both terrestrial and marine resource management and highlights the importance of achieving effective governance across all sectors and at all levels (local, national, and regional) in order to improve natural resource governance in Lau. The Lau Seascope Strategy (LSS), is a twelve-year strategic work plan (2018–2030) that clearly identifies a detailed set of activities necessary to fulfil the objectives, targets and vision of the Lau Seascope Initiative.

Generally, the LSS has achieved various accomplishments, including the development of 17 village-based resource profiles, and the establishment of 13 integrated district management plans. It has also worked on: socialising the Vanua o Lau Deed of Trust within Lau communities; sociocultural mapping surveys in each village; capacity building and awareness of community members on the ridge-to-reef conservation approach; and climate change adaptation and spatial mapping surveys within the Lau Seascope communities.

As one of the key objectives of the LSS, a coordinated “gender inclusion consultation” was conducted to support and revive proper management coordination and implementation targeting women representatives from each village. The theory of change emphasises that applying a gender mainstreaming strategy is key to achieving positive and productive outcomes, in particular the uptake of the LSS awareness, reviving cultural and traditional practices, connecting traditional values to achieve LSS priorities, and supporting traditional leadership in the coordination of all development responsibilities within the community or *vanua*, the Church and the government.

Lau Seascope – through Conservation International’s gender program – conducted a profile assessment of four districts

in Lau to assess and document traditional knowledge and the biocultural diversity in use, and further explore benefits that will accelerate women’s active engagement in advertising their products, and further enhancing their community’s livelihood opportunities.

### Gender inclusion consultations

Gender inclusion consultation promotes the participation of women and men in the formal and informal policy-making process to ensure that their voices are heard, and that their priorities are reflected in formal and informal policies, programmes and projects.

Gender inclusion consultation promotes evidence-based and participatory decision-making, which takes into consideration the different priorities and needs of women and men, including the most marginalised groups and those that are traditionally excluded from decision-making processes.

Women’s participation and inclusion in the Lau Seascope work is vital because local women are in contact daily with both terrestrial and marine resources. Recent research by Waqairatu-Waqainabete et al. (2019) highlights the critical role that fisherwomen play in the Lau Seascope as well as their relative lack of representation in decision-making related to natural resource management. The gender inclusion consultations focused on the Gender Mainstreaming Plan toward the LSS, thus enforcing and reviving traditional practices and ensuring that women’s voices are heard, and their priorities are reflected within the Lau Seascope Initiative. Women are the immediate household mentors and coaches that keep cultural integrity and heritage intact for a community, mainly within a family unit.



Women of Vatoa with the "Gatuvakatoga". ©Isimeli Loganimoce

## Methodology

In a concerted effort to encourage women's leadership and influence in implementing the LSS, Conservation International actively engaged all women from the four districts within Lau Seascape Initiative to identify culturally appropriate opportunities for women to engage in and effect change by motivating traditional leaders to deliver equitable and sustainable conservation benefits for all community members. The gender inclusion consultations focused on women's observations, perceptions of change and women's current traditional practises and their significance. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and through targeted focus group discussions. Discussions were conducted in the Lau dialect in a semi-informal process in order to encourage women to feel comfortable voicing their views. All comments made, whether relating to the questions or not, were noted.

## Results

### Gathering baseline information about the district and its traditional practices, and the significance of those practices

#### Ono District

The District of Ono is well known for its handcraft work called *tabu kaisi*, a traditional Lauan mat originating from Ono, where the tapa fibre is known as *gatu vakatonga* and *gatu vakaviti*. The women are well connected traditionally, and are well respected in the community and supported by the men from their families and other associated groups within the village. Most of the villages have an association

that is registered with the Ministry of Women and are well connected and supported. There is a women's resource centre in the district. The main fishing methods the women use are handlining, net fishing, gleaning and other traditional fishing methods.

#### Vulaga District

The District of Vulaga is well known for its handcrafts, referred to as *sivisivi*, and a well-known seafood delicacy, *kaikoso*, which is a kind of clam (*Anadara antiquata*). The main handcraft product is the well-known bowl used in western Polynesian and Fijian for kava. This product is carved from a hardwood called *vesi* (*Intsia bijuga*). Women are well respected in the community and are supported by the men from their family and other associated groups within the village. The women have an association that is registered with the Ministry of Women, and have organised weekly programmes for their association, and as individuals. The main fishing methods the women practice are handlining, net fishing, gleaning and other traditional fishing methods. The main sources of income for women are selling fish, selling woven mats and selling coconut palm leaf hats. Other sources of income for the women's association is through fundraising events, such as like Buzzar.

#### Kabara District

Kabara women are also well known for their handcraft work on mat weaving called the *bati ni Kabara*, and other traditional mats. Nakeleyaga, the chiefly village of Kabara District, is the leading village within the district, whereby the women support the traditional practices and obligation.. Women

are well respected in the community and are supported by the men from their families and other associated groups in the village. There is a women's association in Kabara that is registered with the Ministry of Women. The main fishing methods the women in this district use are handlining, net fishing, gleaning and other traditional fishing methods. The Kabara women's association is very active socially and economically at the district level.

### Moce District

Nasau Village is the paramount village of Moce District, and is well known for its tapa cloth *masi* making. The district is also known for its unique *masi* design. The women's main source of income is selling *masi*. The women are well connected traditionally. The women are well respected in the community and supported by the men from their families and other associated groups within the village. The women's club is registered with the Ministry of Women. The women are engaged in a project of planting the trees from which tapa cloth is made, which is a major source of income for women and their club. The women have been well supported by the Ministry of Women with handicraft-making accessories and resources. The main fishing methods practiced by the women in this district are handlining, net fishing, gleaning and other traditional fishing methods.

### Identifying common gender activities and alternative livelihoods practices

It should be noted that the above roles are generalised, and that variations can be found based on a range of influencing factors, including age, geography, culture, ethnicity and whether one is residing in one's original village or in the village of one's spouse. These differences in roles result in knowledge and skillsets that tend to be assigned to either women or men. Therefore, women and men tend to notice different indicators of stress or change in the environment, and have different ideas about using agricultural and fisheries products. This means, in turn, that women and men can

be distinctly valuable and complementary resource people when managing natural resources, adapting to climate change, managing for disasters, and sustainably engaging in economic development. Despite the critical role that women play in food production, they often face barriers to accessing agricultural land, training opportunities, credit and services. The agricultural production that women and girls perform also tends to be considered part of women's household responsibilities and not "real" work.

Increasing women's economic empowerment through improvements to sustainable livelihoods and value chains, presents challenges such as "the burden of extra work, difficulties finding childcare, problems accessing markets, and increased demand from husbands and relatives for money" as well as disagreements on "household expenditure, marital conflict and violence".

### Conclusion

The Lau Seascope Initiative is building on years of dedicated work by Conservation International, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, and all 12 parties of the Lau Seascope memorandum of understanding to understand and design value-adding economic projects that are currently comfortable against women's position in communities. The strategy is committed to an inclusive approach to project planning and implementation, and promotes and amplifies the participation of women and vulnerable groups throughout the project cycle. Gender mainstreaming within these projects has enabled natural resource management to become increasingly influenced by the importance of the role of women within their communities and the knowledge and perspectives they hold. At the end stages of project cycles, the engagement of women in sustainable production pathways is key to enabling women's ability to carry out profitable economic alternative projects to support the well-being of their families and the community at large.

Sector	Men	Women
<b>Fisheries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fishing from vessels inside and outside the reef</li> <li>Fishing from canoes and boats with lines or nets</li> <li>Wading with nets</li> <li>Day and night spearfishing</li> <li>Harvesting and processing catch</li> <li>Boat captains with crews</li> <li>Trawling with fishing rods and lines</li> <li>Illegal fishing activities such as poaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wading with handlines</li> <li>Fishing from bridges and promontories with lines</li> <li>Reef gleaning for invertebrates, octopus and shellfish</li> <li>Diving in the sea for saltwater mussels (kaikoso)</li> <li>Collecting crabs</li> <li>Sea grape harvesting and marketing for sale</li> <li>Collection of speciality products such as beche-de-mer and trochus</li> </ul>
<b>Agriculture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearing gardens and burning of land</li> <li>Maintaining large root crops</li> <li>Using machines or tools to plough, cut bush or harvest farms</li> <li>Planting and tending to cash crops such as coconuts, kava, cocoa, coffee, taro, tree fruits</li> <li>Raising livestock</li> <li>Transporting products to markets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weeding and maintenance of market and subsistence gardens and cash crop plantations (taro, cassava)</li> <li>Processing subsistence crops, coconut oil, honey</li> <li>Market sales</li> <li>Cash crop and market garden post-harvest processing</li> <li>Raising poultry and small livestock (pigs and sheep)</li> <li>Niche agricultural ventures in floriculture, vanilla, bees</li> <li>Handicrafts (mats, baskets, sewing, niche products such as masi)</li> </ul>



Women of Ogea in the consultation. ©Isimeli Loganimoce

The economic portion of the project – documented from the four islands – is adequate for structuring sustainable production pathways and to position the women’s group to enter into formal streams of economic development and The commitment by women in taking part in sustainable economic development in order to improve the quality of life and environment, which will be beneficial for the local community but mainly for the women’s group in fulfilling its commitments towards environment, social and economic responsibilities.

Women from the southern Lau islands have really embraced the LSS. These women have discussed, identified and confirmed the importance of their roles and responsibilities traditionally in strengthening and reviving the culture and traditional practices of their *Vanua*, especially their required support to the *Masi ni Vanua o Lau* overall. In addition, the LSS will leverage the value of women’s contribution to the project, and develop a women’s economic empowerment approach to reduce gender inequities in priority sites and in many activities throughout the project. This will help address existing gender inequities that may impact the outcomes of the programme but will also influence the continued success of the outcomes post-project.

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