

Women fish too: Invisible women in tuna industries¹

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The assumption that the tuna fishing industry is a man's world is not only misleading, but also damaging.

In the coastal Indonesian city of Bitung, women who fish cannot formally register their occupation because the registration system has no option for women to register as a fisher, but defaults their occupation as “housewife”. Women fishers thus miss out on government support provided to fishers. The assumption that the fishing industry is dominated by men, or that only men fish, is not only wrong, but damaging.

Given that women make up half of the world's population, it is important to know if the development of fishing industries benefits both women and men. A first step towards determining this is making women visible through gender-disaggregated data in order to gain a better understanding of how women are impacted. It is estimated that more than 300,000 people are employed in tuna value chains in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (Barclay et al. 2022). In the Pacific, there are around 22,350 tuna-related jobs (Ruaia et al. 2020), about one-third of which is in fishing and almost all of those involved are men. About two-thirds of all tuna-related work is in processing and ancillary industries, where women are the majority (Barclay et al. 2022). In Thailand, around 80,000 people - mostly women - work in tuna processing (Asia Foundation and International Labour Organization 2015). Tuna fishing, processing and trading are also big industries in Indonesia – which has by far the largest catch of any country in the region – and the Philippines.

Still, there is so much about women in fisheries value chains that is unknown. The western and central Pacific Ocean tuna fisheries, estimated to

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science, and initiatives inspired by feminism are often viewed with suspicion. Public policy towards fishing views social benefit as the gross value of production or contribution to the national gross domestic product, perhaps total job numbers. And that is as far as it goes. It is a blunt instrument.

Research into several key regional tuna fishing ports – Bitung in Indonesia, General Santos City in the Philippines, Noro in Solomon Islands, and Levuka and Suva in Fiji – aimed at better understanding where women are in within tuna value chains. It found industrial tuna vessel crews are 100 percent men in Bitung and General Santos City (Barclay et al. 2022).

Noro, Levuka and Suva were an exception, however, with a handful of women trained as cadets in recent donor-funded programmes. Women are usually involved in fishing companies as office workers and managers, although they are generally in lower position levels, with the higher prestige and remuneration roles mainly occupied by men.

Fishing vessels are some of the most dangerous workplaces in the world. The negative impacts of industrial tuna fishing include long absences from home and the risky nature of both fishing work and the living conditions onboard some vessels, where human rights abuses have been recorded, including when docked in ports (Environmental Justice Foundation 2019). Port areas tend to have high rates of gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections, and drug and alcohol use. These problems affect crew members, as well as their families.

As in other kinds of seafood industries, processing line work is mostly done by women. In Bitung, 70 percent of cannery employees are women, while managers are virtually all

men (Barclay et al. 2022). In General Santos City, processing plant employees are 80 percent women, while in Noro and Levuka, women make up 64 percent and 65 percent, respectively, of tuna processing plant employees (Barclay et al. 2022). Women gain employment at all levels of processing plants from the processing lines to quality control, and some in management. Wages are often not high, but formal employment brings benefits such as maternity leave and insurances that informal work does not offer.

In informal tuna processing, the picture is much more diverse. Smoked tuna, or *cakalang fufu*, enterprises in Bitung are often owned by women but the labour is done by men, while women in General Santos City are heavily involved in making tuna snacks and condiments *chicharon* and *dayok*. In Solomon Islands, women cook tuna rejects from industrial fleets and tuna from small-scale fisheries as fish and chips or traditional baked products, and sell it in local markets.

The case of SolTuna cannery in Noro shows the benefits that can result from taking a gender lens to the processing environment, thereby leading to a better understanding of the reasons behind high absenteeism and turnover. Some female factory workers, who are first in their families to have a regular wage-earning job, had little financial literacy and were unable to make their wages last the full pay period. They took days off to raise cash in the markets. Women were also leaving factory work once they had children due to a lack of affordable childcare nearby and informally sold items in the market instead due to the convenience.

Once SolTuna had a better understanding of their female workforce, they worked with human resources specialists who devised a culturally appropriate family budget. The



Women selling fish and chips in the market at Noro, Solomon Islands. © Kate Barclay

result was a 6 per cent drop in absenteeism and reports of a happier workforce (International Finance Corporation 2022). A childcare centre is now being built near the factory.

All of these strategies can be considered and implemented in many other factory lines in tuna-dependent communities to improve the lives of women, and the communities they are part of.

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