

The critical contribution of women fishers to food security and livelihoods in Fiji

Summary for Decision-Makers



INTRODUCTION

Coastal villages in Fiji depend on seafood for protein and livelihoods. Within these communities, women fishers play critical roles in household food security, nutrition and income generation, but their work and contributions are underestimated and overlooked. Instead, national reporting has focused on commercial fisheries, traditionally considered the role of men. Quantifying the role of women in fisheries is critical for the effective management of Fiji's fisheries, as it allows interventions to be tailored to specific groups of fishers and thus increase their effectiveness.

In response to these information needs, fisheries-dependent communities across Fiji were surveyed to gain a better understanding of the role of *iTaukei* women fishers in small-scale fisheries. Over 1200 women fishers in 113 villages and 11 provinces were interviewed between 2017 and 2018. The survey explored fishing motivations, fishing strategies across five habitats (i.e. freshwater rivers, mangroves and mud flats, soft bottom, coral reef and open ocean), seafood¹ sales, and dependency on fisheries. This Summary for Decision-Makers highlights key findings and recommendations of the study.



¹ For the purpose of this study 'seafood' is defined as edible freshwater and saltwater fish, invertebrates and seaweed.

SUBSISTENCE vs. COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

The role of fishers in Fiji has evolved and women are now fishing in all habitats, harvesting a wider range of fish species, and engaging more in the commercial sector. Fishing for household consumption was still the primary motivation for more than 80% of the women, compared with 14% who fished primarily for income. Collectively, women fishers estimated that on average, 70% of their catch was consumed and the rest was sold to supplement household income. Women also fished to support cultural and social events within their community. National statistics that focus only on commercial fisheries will underestimate and undervalue the volume of fish and invertebrates being caught, and the contributions of women to small-scale fisheries in Fiji.

Recommendations

1. Fisheries data should be sex-disaggregated to quantify the role and complementary contributions of women and men to the fisheries sector.
2. Subsistence fisheries contribute to Fiji's food security and nutrition, and should be valued and included in national statistics.
3. Women's catches must be accounted for when reporting all fisheries landings and development planning.

FISHING STRATEGIES

Similar to earlier studies, women fishers mainly owned and used inexpensive, low technology gear such as handlines and small hand nets which are more sustainable for fisheries. In contrast, more complex, expensive and less sustainable gear were more often owned by someone else in their household, clan or village. For example, only 30% of mesh gill nets were owned by women.

BARRIER: Compared to men, women do not use or have access to the same diversity of fishing gear.

Contrary to previous studies, almost half of the women used a boat, usually without a motor, to reach one or more of their fishing sites. However, boats were rarely owned at the individual level and largely belonged to the village (39%), household (20%) or clan (13%). The women are therefore reliant on boat availability for their fishing activity, and must share with other users.

BARRIER: A quarter of women did not know how to drive a boat with a motor, and those that did, generally did not have a boat license.

The majority of women fished over a wide range of habitats from freshwater rivers to the open ocean. The exception was Naitasiri Province where the women fished almost exclusively in inland rivers. Soft bottom and coral reef habitats had the highest use, accessed by over 60% of the women fishers. Harvesting of soft bottom habitat supports the traditional 'gleaner' image of women fishers. However, there have been significant increases in the number of women accessing coral reef habitats further afar, traditionally viewed as the domain of men.

Women fishers mainly fished close to their village, taking one hour or less to reach their fishing sites, and then fishing for two to three hours. The women preferred fishing during the morning and/or low tide when habitats are most accessible and when they were free from other family or village responsibilities.



KEY FISHERIES FOR WOMEN

Women caught a higher number of fish species than invertebrate and seaweed species, for both consumption and sale, across all habitats. This finding goes against conventional views that women fishers mainly focused on invertebrates and seaweed. To date there has been limited information on the fish most commonly caught by women. The current study documented that the main fish species targeted by women for food and income were groupers (*kawakawa*, *Epinephelus* spp.), Pacific yellowtail emperor (*sabutu*, *Lethrinus atkinsoni*) and thumbprint emperor (*kabatia*, *Lethrinus harak*).

Invertebrate fisheries were still important and dominated by women. The main species collected were freshwater prawns (*ura*, *Macrobrachium* spp.), freshwater mussels (*kai*, *Batissa violacea*), giant clams (*Tridacna* spp.), mud crabs (*qari*, *Scylla serrata*), and sea cucumbers. The report also found that brown land crabs (*lairo*, *Cardisoma carnifex*) were a key subsistence and income fishery for women fishers in the mangrove and mud flat habitat; however, very little is known about this fishery, harvest levels and the status of populations.

Most women reported their invertebrate and seaweed harvests in pieces, kilograms, bundles, plastic shopping bags, flour sacks and heaps, using local names, making it difficult to quantify the overall volume harvested by women in Fiji.

Recommendations

1. Assist interested women in obtaining boat licenses and relevant training (e.g. safety at sea, engine maintenance).
2. Improve women's access to communally-owned fishing gear and boats.
3. Explore and support opportunities for boats to be owned by women's co-operatives and women's fishing groups.
4. Further research is needed on the volumes and sizes of fish and invertebrates harvested from key nursery areas such as mangrove forests and seagrass beds, and the impact to fisheries.
5. The different units of catch women use for invertebrates and seaweed should be quantified to enable estimates of catch volumes.
6. Given women fishers are targeting groupers, awareness on the seasonal grouper ban, and consultations on national management plans and proposed size limits must include them.



FISHERIES LIVELIHOOD DEPENDENCY

Fresh fish and invertebrates were the main source of protein for households. Fresh fish was consumed once a day on average, and invertebrates served as a supplementary source of protein. Over 70% of the invertebrates consumed were caught by the women themselves. Women were also the primary providers of fresh fish, although to a lesser (~10%) extent, as more was caught by another member of their household. This is because male fishers in many of the households caught the majority of fish. Regardless, women fishers played an important role in providing fresh food and protein for their households.

Only 8% of women were entirely dependent on fisheries for income. Instead, the majority had at least one other livelihood such as handicrafts, a small business or farming. The women generally ranked fishing and handicrafts as their most important livelihoods. Handicrafts were the largest and most stable source of income for many women fishers (28% and 33%, respectively).

Just over half the women felt that it was easy to earn money from non-fisheries livelihoods, although this varied across the provinces. For example, women fishers in Rewa Province were more likely to disagree, while women fishers in Ba Province neither agreed or disagreed.

Overall, women fishers received one third of their income from fisheries, and only a quarter received all of their income from fisheries. This means that for most women, fisheries are an important secondary source of income.

SEAFOOD SALES

Generally, women received the highest prices from municipal markets, middlemen or middlewomen, and the lowest from inside their village. In some villages, the women believed they received lower prices than men because they largely sold seafood inside their villages while men sold at municipal markets.

BARRIER: Women fishers from different provinces face several key difficulties in selling their catch at a municipal market. These include no market (Lau and Lomaiviti), difficult and/or expensive transportation to major markets (Nadroga/Navosa and Macuata), or too much competition resulting in lower prices (Rewa and Tailevu).

Over 90% of women fishers used their income from seafood sales for household expenses. Food, church, village functions and school were also important uses of money received from fisheries. Only 7% of women fishers did any value-adding to their catch, and the majority sold their seafood fresh. Those women that did value-adding, largely made seafood packs usually with fish. Seafood packs were usually sold at ferry terminals in Lomaiviti Province and at hotels in Ba Province. A third of the women also carried out post-harvest processing for someone else, usually their spouse.

Recommendations

1. Hold trainings on value-adding methods and opportunities for fishers, particularly women who play a significant role in market sales.
2. Explore opportunities to diversify the markets that women fishers have access to.
3. Given the diversity and volumes of invertebrates removed from rivers and nearshore environments, further studies are needed to better understand the ecological impact of harvests.
4. Given the reliance women have on fisheries, it is important that measures are in place to ensure fishing grounds remain productive.
5. For the provinces where women felt it was not easy to earn money outside of fisheries, assist with the diversification of livelihoods options.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN FISHERIES PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Village meetings were reported as the preferred method for getting information on fisheries. In terms of participation at the village level, over half of the women fishers stated they were involved in making decisions about, or managing, marine resources. However, most of this participation was passive, meaning they attended meetings but did not speak, and only 1% of the women fishers surveyed had a leadership role. Women fishers also believed that men were more likely to be able to become involved in the management of marine resources.

In order for women fishers' unique needs and perspectives to be incorporated into fisheries planning and management, they must have a chance to be involved and to share their concerns and needs. Their changing role in fisheries also necessitates greater involvement as traditional assumptions no longer accurately reflect their contributions. This report illuminates the challenges faced by women fishers as they seek to bridge two worlds: fishing and gleaning for traditional obligations and to sell part of their catch to support their families and communities.

Given the critical role of women fishers in food security, nutrition and livelihoods, they must be included in fisheries planning, management and development.

Recommendations

1. Work with provincial, district and village councils to develop locally and culturally appropriate approaches and pathways that encourage and support the participation of women in the management and development of marine resources.
2. Consult women fishers on fisheries-related decisions using gender-sensitive facilitation techniques. This may include meeting with women fishers separately to ensure they have a chance to provide input and feedback.



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