CONSTRUCTING REALITIES: DOCUMENTING WOMEN’S FISHERIES IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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Abstract
Research on Pacific Islands has revealed the pivotal involvement of women in all aspects of fisheries, from harvesting through processing to marketing. Women are not “just gleaning”; they are making essential contributions to local food security and in many cases, also enabling the commercial fishing activities of male family members. These days, they are increasingly engaged in food and commercial fisheries that employ modern technologies as well as traditional skills and detailed marine ecological knowledge. Nevertheless, stereotypes persist that reflect androcentric Western paradigms and that allow women’s work to be undervalued or ignored. This leads in turn to the perpetuation of policies and societal institutions that discriminate on the basis of gender and inhibit women’s full participation in fisheries management and economic development. As researchers interested in promoting equity and sustainability in fisheries, we each need to examine our use of words and patterns of analysis so that we do not become part of the problem. Traditional Pacific societies that take a more holistic approach to the relationship of humans within nature may hold the key to more equitable and effective models of fisheries management.

Introduction
Over the past year, a group of researchers in the South Pacific Islands has been taking a close look at gender roles in small-scale fisheries, fish marketing and fish processing (Novaczek et al. 2005). This work has been supported by the government of Canada (Canada–South Pacific Ocean Development Program), the University of the South Pacific and the University of Prince Edward Island. As a result, 13 case studies from 7 different countries, as well as 2 overview papers, have been developed for publication in 2005 in a volume called Pacific Voices: Equity and Sustainability in Pacific Island Fisheries (Novaczek et al. 2005). These studies highlight the complexity, diversity and fluidity of small-scale fisheries activities. They help us understand how small-scale fisheries intersect with, reflect and affect culture, tradition, economy and society in island communities.
Changing Fisheries on Pacific Islands

The shape of small-scale fisheries on any island depends upon many factors. These include the types of fish habitats and species available, gender roles and intergenerational relations in coastal societies, the degree to which technologies have been introduced and adopted by various societal groups, and other processes of modernization and commercialization. Like many aspects of society in Pacific Islands, fisheries lie at the nexus of tradition and modernity. Fishermen and fisherwomen must continually negotiate traditional culture and the modern world. In Vanuatu, for example, women fishers still remember the ancient art of singing to octopus to lure them from their hiding places. At the same time, these villagers are increasingly active participants in globalized commercial activities such as the ornamental fish trade, employing sophisticated technologies and receiving ideas and information from global networks (Tarisesei and Novaczek 2005).

Many of the case studies in Pacific Voices trace change through time in village fisheries. A long-standing complaint from development practitioners is that their programs and projects take root slowly if at all in the South Pacific (Veitayaki and Novaczek 2005). Yet, from the perspective of elders in coastal villages, change over the past hundred years has been rapid and profound. Not only have new technologies been adopted, leading to the intensification of pressure on coastal resources, but these changes have often been gendered (Ram-Bidesi and Mitchell 2005). For example, a case study from Vanuatu documents how hook and line gear has been taken up by both men and women whereas other fishing gear such as spear guns, gill nets and deep water reels remain exclusively male technologies (Tarisesei and Novaczek 2005).

In Fiji, by contrast, some women use gill nets and take small boats out to relatively deep water to fish (Vunisea 2005). In a case study from the Solomon Islands (Agassi 2005), it was shown how women and youths have become increasingly prominent in fisheries, compared to the past. Everywhere there was evidence of increasing commercialization of what had traditionally been women’s food fisheries. In some cases, women entered male domains; in others, men entered women’s fisheries as they became commercially important. In Tuvalu (Resture and Resture 2005) and Solomon Islands (Fidal-Hickey and Whippy-Morris 2005) cultural shell crafts have been transformed into tourism products, with different ramifications for men and women. As women entered the fish trade in Kiribati and Fiji, their business development needs were largely ignored owing, in part, to gender discrimination in society (Tekanene 2005; Vunisea 2005). When Fijian industrial fisheries required a cheap and malleable labor force for fish processing, women were the preferred recruits, a situation that had gender impacts for families and communities (Rajan 2005).

Other changes in Pacific fisheries have been related to rapid population growth and the increasing proportion of young people in Pacific societies. Persons under the age of 25 now compose 50% or more of most Pacific Island populations. An increasingly youthful and educated society means that the desire for modern amenities and the cash with which to purchase them is growing. This desire commonly outstrips both employment opportunities and the productive capacity of available natural resources (ADB 1996). The gender roles and relative positions of youth and elders in fisheries, as well as pressures on fisheries resources, therefore change and evolve over time.

Also changing is the relationship of coastal communities to their resources. In the past, access to marine food species may have been controlled by hereditary chiefs. In light of modern pressures that include declining fish stocks, habitat degradation, climate change and the entry of foreign corporations into fisheries, the need for more complex and comprehensive management has become clear. This includes restricting access to fishing grounds and regulating fishing technologies. In many countries of the South Pacific, academics, fisheries departments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are working with communities to develop local resource management institutions, sometimes based on traditional institutions (Veitayaki and Vesi 2005). Often, this involves setting aside areas of the sea as protected areas where no fishing is allowed. Such regulatory and management initiatives have different impacts.
on youths and elders, as well as differential impacts on men and women. Where traditional culture dictates that women may not participate in public decision-making, women may end up bearing more of the sacrifices required by the new management system (Siamomua-Momoemauasu 2005). Youths may also be left out of the decision-making process and as a result, may find destructive ways to show their resistance to domination by male elders (Novaczek and Tarisesei 2005).

**Women in Pacific Island Fisheries**

Women’s small-scale, inshore fisheries provide essential protein to a majority of Pacific Island citizens. Yet, the importance of these fisheries remains largely unquantified and women’s work is taken for granted. In the same way, the reproductive work of women that supports and enables all other forms of local economic activity is also largely neglected.

In fisheries literature pertaining to the South Pacific region there are often generalizations made that stereotype inshore fisheries, and the fishing efforts of women and children, as relatively small and unimportant. These stereotypes suggest that women restrict their activities to shallow waters, fish for family food rather than for commercial sale, and use only simple technologies. Further, in the absence of a clear cash value, food fisheries are assumed to be less important than commercial fisheries.

Another tendency that effaces women’s fishing work is the common assumption that fishing for food is simply a natural extension of their reproductive work. It goes unpaid, there are no benefits or retirement pensions attached to it, and therefore it seems not worthy of the same attention as “real” work, which is performed for wages outside of the home.

Women also face particular barriers to participation in decision-making processes related to the management and conservation of their fisheries. Developing world government institutions engaged in fisheries management, which are modeled on those of the west, are typically male-dominated. Identification of male managers with persons of their own gender means that unless they take care to be equitable, they will pay more attention to men, while failing to recognize women’s work. As a result, women’s fisheries attract less attention from development agencies and may be left out when modern fishing technologies and methods are introduced. This is a vicious circle that ultimately restricts women’s opportunities to engage in decision making related to fisheries management and development. This in turn reinforces women’s lower status in society.

**Problematizing the Western Paradigm**

The lack of recognition of women’s work in Pacific fisheries mirrors western industrial thinking, which also values commercial and industrial-scale fisheries over small-scale food fisheries. Western patterns of thought are frequently dichotomous rather than holistic. Rather than grapple with the complexities of nuanced reality, western decision-makers often characterize situations in oppositional terms: things are black or white, left or right, good or bad, weak or strong, etc. This convenient but superficial classification system leads to unwarranted assumptions and prejudices. Because genders are also, at first glance, a clear-cut dichotomy, our tendency is to set male-female alongside these other dualisms and then assign “male” to one side of the pair (typically that which is dominant, strong and positive) and “female” to the other. This reflects another western penchant – biological determinism based on an observation that, on average, human strength and size is greater in males. The tendency to pigeon-hole reality into tidy, dichotomous boxes leaves little room for complex grades of gender, or the possibility of, for example, strength within apparent weakness, or power inherent in smallness. Because education in the Pacific has been modeled on western institutions, indigenous researchers have to be similarly on guard not to fall into the habit of glib stereotypes and assumptions.
A key western influence in the Pacific has been the church, and so religion has been an important path for the spread of androcentric and dichotomous patterns of thought. Various Christian denominations have promoted the subservience of women to men. The church has also worked to advance the separation of humans from nature, effacing many traditional institutions that, directly or indirectly, served to protect the environment. Here is another example of dualism, the relegation of entire cultures to one side or the other: good or bad, civilized or wild, God-fearing or heathen.

A further tendency that we need to guard against is the (now discredited but not yet extinct) western style of fisheries science that dissects marine resources into discrete stocks and then attempts to manage each in isolation from the rest. Not only are fish considered in isolation from their supporting natural environment, but fisheries are regulated in isolation from the people, especially women, who depend on fish for livelihood. In the Pacific, where fisheries management is in many respects in its infancy, there are opportunities to develop more holistic and effective strategies for management and conservation.

Cultural concepts and practices in Pacific Island societies provide unique opportunities to rethink the way in which western ideas have come to dominate perspectives on the marine environment. Indigenous concepts of the environment are often expansive, describing not only place and space but the related identities of self and community (Rodman 1992). Many such cultural ideas that are glossed as traditional or customary are still very much alive and central to dynamic communities (Malimali 2004; Vunisea 2005). Hviding (1998) has noted that there is a “contextual flexibility” at the heart of customary or traditional practices in Melanesia which means that these cultural systems can and do effectively accommodate to change. Indigenous cultural practices can also provide creative direction for understanding the environment while offering a critique of the Western ideas underpinning the often limited and instrumental approaches to the marine environment and fisheries.

The Challenge to Fisheries Researchers

Fisheries researchers are starting to pay attention to the roles of both genders in fisheries, to document women’s contributions and to ask questions about the efficacy of male-dominated decision-making structures. Pacific fisheries, and the gender roles and power structures in rapidly globalizing Pacific societies, require careful examination and thoughtful interpretation. In fishing communities, the interface of tradition and modernity is continually contested ground. In this context, gender roles and responsibilities are both complex and fluid and cannot be captured in facile stereotypes. Recognizing the complexity and variability of local contexts helps to keep us humble as we struggle to facilitate development of local management institutions.

One sure way to appreciate the complexities of local context is through action research that involves living in a fishing community. In the Pacific Voices project, researchers were encouraged to spend time in their case study communities. Where they uncovered a need to address some pressing local issue, they consulted local people to develop concrete recommendations for action. In many cases, researchers were studying their own home villages and so brought an unusual depth of understanding to their task. The results are encouraging and indicative of what can be done through detailed inspection of “the local” through a gender lens. In many cases, as one might expect when dealing with research topics that are under-represented in academic literature, a key recommendation was for more research. In every case, writers were also able, after discussions with local people, to point to practical solutions for local problems. More importantly, because of their hands-on approach and their explicit attention to both male and female voices, researchers could discuss which of the possible options would gain local support and be feasible within the cultural, social and economic context at hand. In some cases, options were gendered. In Solomon Islands, for example, Malaitan villages involved in shell money production urgently need to establish controls over shell harvesting (Fidali-Hickey and Whippy-Morris 2005). Whereas men suggested the reinstatement of chiefly
authority and reinvention of traditional harvesting bans (which included gender-based bans on certain reefs), women favored increased government participation and pointed out that for youths, the relevance of cultural taboos is declining. Considering the need for both local and national harvesting controls, the researcher recommended a multi-party approach involving church, traditional leaders, NGOs and governments.

Often, fishers and especially fisherwomen feel incapable of designing and maintaining their own fisheries management and marketing systems. They look to outside agencies for leadership. In many Pacific countries where research was performed, we noted the increasing importance of NGOs, sometimes with support from academics, in facilitating collaboration between fishers and their governments. Documenting such partnerships, noting the respective roles of men, women and youths, and examining what works and what does not in different contexts, is an emerging and important area of work for Pacific researchers.

**Pacific Paradigm**

Food fisheries are critical to food security in the Pacific, and many are also in decline and under threat from many forces (Sauni and Fay-Sauni 2005). Given the importance of their fisheries, it would be foolish to ignore the potential for conservation and management that is embodied by women and youths. If these fishers are denied a place in decision making for management, if their ecological knowledge is not tapped to support conservation strategies, then further degradation of inshore habitats and loss of productivity seem inevitable. The alternative path, which deviates from the typical Western industrial paradigm, recognizes the importance and potential power of the small, resists generalizations and accords respect to active fishers of all ages and both genders. This alternative encourages self-sufficiency that is based on respect for a natural world – **vanua** – where humans are not the masters of creation but an integral part of a complex dynamic that requires thoughtful negotiation.

**References**


