

## **WOMEN S ROLE AND ISSUES FOR FISHERIES MANAGEMENT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Oceans in the new millenium: Challenges and opportunities for the Islands is indeed a very appropriate theme when we look at women s roles and their involvement in the fisheries sector. It is a challenge to convince planners, policy makers, government and communities that what women do are essential tasks in the maintenance of society and economy although much of what they do may be unpaid work. Furthermore, there is a strong traditional belief that the ocean and fishing is men s domain where men are able to take risks to fish from boats in the deep sea whereas activities like collecting shellfish and seaweeds in the inshore areas by women is not considered as fishing .

We all understand that women and men play different roles in the Pacific Island cultures, have different responsibilities for work in the household, in the economic sectors and in the community. Through a gender analysis, we are able to clarify the exact rôles and how they relate to equitable distribution of benefits and costs of any initiative. The rationale for considering gender in fisheries sector is linked to the principles of sound development through participatory governance and a commitment to ensure that costs and benefits of development initiatives are distributed as evenly as possible to all. (Nelson, G. & P. Tuara, 1998). The involvement of both men and women is seen as necessary if we want to achieve sustainable fisheries development.

The focus of this workshop is on women s roles and issues for fisheries management.

Fisheries are one of the most important resources for Pacific Islands. Fisheries (including the industry and resources) play a vital role in the economy of many Pacific Islands.

Fisheries provide an important source of food, income and employment. Fisheries production and consumption are extremely important in light of the dominance of coastal maritime communities who have a long tradition of fishing and dependence on marine resources for their survival. The importance of fisheries resources is reflected in the regions high per capita consumption of fish and fisheries products. For, example, the average per capita consumption estimated for Solomon Islands is 60 kg, in Fiji, it is 46.9 kg, in Samoa, 42.9 kg and in Vanuatu it is 30 kg. These are all much higher than the FAO estimate for world average of 14 kg. (Bidesi, 1998)

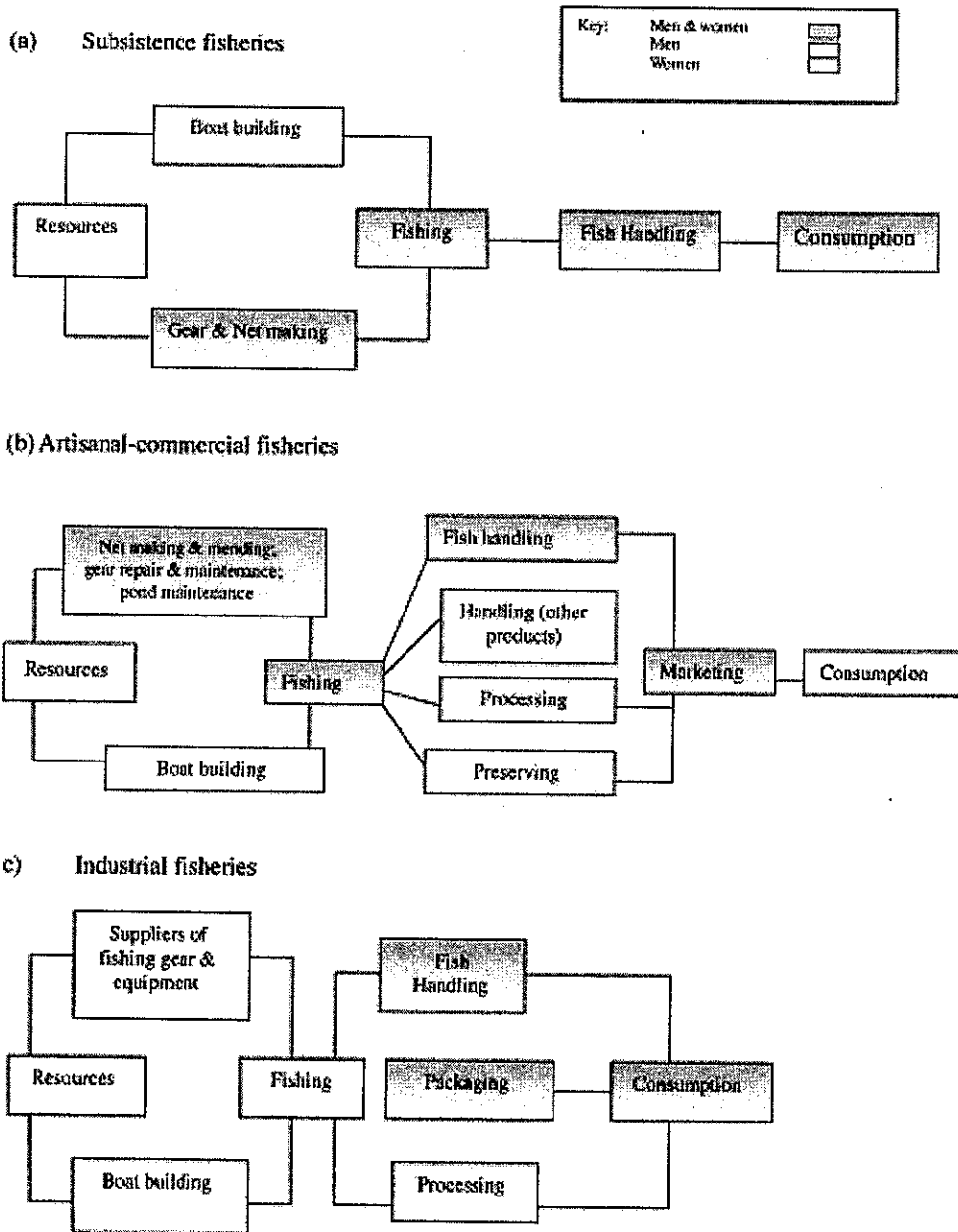
Besides providing food, the fisheries sector provides an important source of income through both formal and informal employment. The importance of sustainable fisheries must also be considered in light of fragile island ecosystems with limited economic opportunities.

The fisheries sector can be divided into three broad socio-economic categories: subsistence, artisanal-commercial, and industrial fishery. Recreational fishery and aquaculture can also be classified within these three categories based on their socio-economic characteristics.

The participation of women in fisheries is directly dependent on the changes that take place within these categories of fisheries. In subsistence economies, fishing forms a way of life for men and women alike in the coastal and inland river areas. As the fishery develops to artisanal-commercial and to industrial,

the involvement of women is modified to specific tasks within the catching, processing and marketing sectors. This is well illustrated in the diagrams below. The type of work performed by women becomes limited which also reduces women's influence and control over the decision making process on factors that may affect them within the industry.

Division of labour by gender as the fishery progresses



Adapted from: CIDA (1993) in: Bidesi, 1998

In most coastal developing countries including the Pacific Islands, fisheries is seen as one of the most crucial areas for economic development as well as a source of nutritional security that is, as an important source of protein.

These are two major inter-related issues to consider:

- i) Commercialization of fisheries — how these impact women both directly and indirectly
- ii) Nutritional food security - through artisanal and subsistence fisheries and its changing character

## COMMERCIALISATION OF FISHERIES

Let us look at the impact of commercialization of fisheries aimed towards achieving economic development. This is further reinforced by the economic reforms because of structural adjustment policies that focus on generating economic growth in order to improve the well being of people.

Commercialization of fisheries is seen in two major ways. One where women themselves produce surplus for markets to earn cash to meet their household obligations and other needs. This is reflected in the changing character of subsistence fishery because of monetization.

The second type of commercialization is associated with more formal and organized type of production system where fishing is seen as a regular source of either part time or full-time income. This is closely linked to programmes under national fisheries development plans where fishing activities are facilitated through government assistance and support such as deep-sea fin fishery, seaweeds, pearl cultivation, live-reef fishes, aquarium fishes, and nearshore and offshore tuna fishery.

Participation of women in commercialization of fisheries is partly limited to shore-based and inshore areas closer to their homes so that they can manage both household chores and fishing.

Access to means of production such as gear and equipment and the lack of skills to operate are other important factors determining to the nature of women's involvement. Women recognized as informal producers also lack the necessary capital and investment into improved gear and technology. Access to credit to obtain the necessary technology is difficult as they lack collateral. Therefore, as technology improves to expand a fishery or if as a new technique or method is introduced to reduce cost of production, women's accesses to such opportunities are however constrained.

If we consider the technology up-grades in shore-based activities, this involves improvement in post-harvest handling, processing and preservation techniques and marketing and production promotion. Here, women have been traditionally seen to be active in processing and marketing. They provide the bulk of labour force in post-harvest processing and handling.

However, because of shift towards global trade liberalization, Pacific Island countries now recognize the need to improve and maintain quality standards through the application of HACCP and other quality control requirements in order to remain competitive. While the need for training exists many of the regions government still do not have an effective program on HACCP and other quality control requirements. Few people (mostly males) are trained on quality assurance procedures and principles and government and the industry seem reluctant to recruit and train women to up-grade skills of those that are already engaged in processing and handling. Some progress has been made by Secretariat of Pacific Community and Marine Studies Programme but the overall progress to improve fish quality will continue to be slow if women are not targeted as key people requiring training and the industry will suffer as a consequence. As actual operators, women who control this part of the industry must know the technical, legal and administrative requirements and how these affect the market and the industry.

Another aspect of the economic reform policies is that wages should be determined by the market forces without any restraint. In the industrial fisheries sector such as canneries and processing plants,

women provide the bulk of labour force and engage as process workers. Most of the jobs they do are considered as semi-skilled or unskilled, routine and repetitive work requiring very little if any formal training. These jobs rank amongst the lowest paid category and are highly dependent upon the demand by the industry. In real terms, therefore when there are fluctuations in the industry income, these are the most vulnerable group of workers. Those in the upper-levels of skilled and managerial positions are retained (to avoid loss of skilled labour) during crisis, while the women who have no bargaining power are manipulated according to the industries profit demands and performance. Where alternative sources of employment are limited and unemployment is high, women who are really the "back bone" of the industry have to bear burden of instability in their employment conditions. This type of set up also leaves them out of any opportunities to improve themselves through training.

These are some direct effects; however, we generally tend to ignore the indirect effects of industrialization of our fisheries. For example in the tuna industry, which is dominated by foreign fishing vessels, wherever, there is a port service facility for the foreign vessels, there is also a problem of sex trade. Women are increasingly drawn to this type of trade in order to earn cash. The consequences are sex-related diseases and social problems.

In addition, we often do not realize that in smaller islands, a number of local men serve as crews on foreign vessels. These people leave their young families for long periods of time and usually the wife or mother has to manage the children and running of home. Increasing, these are cases where absence of a partner leads to various kinds of social conflict and breakdown of marriages and relationships. While women are indirectly affected, productivity of men who go on the fishing vessels is also affected by worrying what goes on at home!

### **NUTRITIONAL SECURITY**

Let us look at the changes affecting the nutritional security aspects in the fisheries sector.

The artisanal fishery, which consists of subsistence and small-scale commercial operations, has always been seen as a source of domestic food supply providing fish as a major protein source to majority of the Pacific Islanders. However, the globalization of trade in fish and fisheries commodities now poses a real threat to the sustainability of this food security. The long-term costs to women, coastal communities and the economy would be much higher than the benefits derived from trade if current trends in exports continue.

Beche-de-mer, the dried product of sea cucumber is a highly sought after delicacy in oriental markets. The export remains the single largest fishery from the small-scale artisanal sector for many Pacific Islands even though it is characterized by boom and bust cycles. The fishery is an important source of income in many coastal and outer island areas. The expansion of trade into non-traditional markets such as USA, Canada and Australia further lures fishers into production.

The extensive natural reef systems of the Pacific Islands are now seen to possess yet other highly sought after commodities in the global market such as aquarium fishes, live reef food fishes and live coral. Furthermore, commercial aquaculture in coastal areas also focuses on export-orientated non-food fish commodities such as seaweeds and pearl cultivation.

Do Pacific Islanders have real comparative advantage over some of these commodities to engage in international trade?

The nature of some of these types of fisheries is not only detrimental to the coastal environment therefore affects the fishing grounds for subsistence activities but also affects the demand for space in the coastal areas. This is particularly true with the current expansion of seaweed industry where there will be a tendency for monocropping of large areas. Furthermore, seaweed requires devoting regular labour

hours for planting, harvesting and farm maintenance. Not only fishing grounds for subsistence is altered but it also places restriction on time available for subsistence food production.

Another emerging target commodity is live coral export to support the aquarium trade. Not only the involvement of women in this type of fishery is limited; extraction of coral can have several consequences on the reef ecosystems and may affect the coral growth and formation. Healthy coral reefs are not only important for the fishery and the tourism industry, but it also acts as a physical barrier and shelters islands from strong wave action.

Generally, if one looks at the trends in global trade in marine and aquarium curio trade, there is an increase in demand for such commodities. There are no limits to exports and the American Market is growing at a rate 10-15% per year in the last 8 years (Lathrop & Hourgan, 1997). As other regions are banning on the trade in these areas, we in the Pacific are seeing it as an area to expand trade. This is a trade driven industry. We have to be very cautious how we deal with this type of trade that can easily endanger our reefs and subsistence fishing grounds if there is inadequate management, guidelines and monitoring. The exclusion of women from this fishery also leaves them out in any decision making process within the industry that may affect them and their families.

If we briefly look at the beche-de-mer fishery - women not only collect sea cucumbers but they also process. Processing involves various stages from cleaning, boiling, sun drying and smoking, which in turn reduces the volume to almost 1/10 of its size. There has never been any study to look at the long hours of labor utilized in processing of beche-de-mer. One wonders if pricing of beche-de-mer ever takes the cost of such labor.

Where male members of the family have suffered from diving accidents, the women are further burdened to find means to support their families besides taking care of the victims. Usually, there is no basis for compensation because fishers have no formal contracts or agreements with buyers. Where a case for compensation may exist, the amount of payment is usually not adequate as most divers are seen as subsistence fishers where their value of labor is lower than other forms of employment in the economy. There is a need for proper training and monitoring at the community level and divers need to be certified. Exporters and buyers need to formalize contract to establish each parties rights and obligations.

### CHANGING CHARACTER OF SUBSISTENCE FISHERY

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) estimated that 80% of the catch from inshore fisheries is taken for subsistence purposes and the other 20% directed to commercial markets (Dalzell, P.A. & T. Adams, 1994). However, changes are also becoming evident in the subsistence fishery because of influence monetisation.

Women are increasingly seen to engage in fishing not only for household consumption but to supply surplus to domestic markets. Fisheries planners and managers do still not recognize their participation at the market although studies do highlight their dominance in selling a variety of marine products (Lal & Slatter, 1984; Schoeffel, 1984, Bidesi 1994, Vunisea, 1995). In fact, the supply of aquatic non-fish products is now largely carried out by women fishers throughout the Pacific. For example in Fiji, women are the dominant producers and sellers of shellfish, crustaceans, molluscs and seaweeds. In 1996, the fresh water mussel (*Batissa volacea*) locally known as *kai* constituted 80% of the non fin-fish production by volume (Fisheries Division, 1996). Women are the dominant producers and sellers of *kai*. Because of the informal nature of these fishing activities, there has been very little of any documentation on subsistence fishing activities.

Vunisea, further describes how women are able to organise themselves into informal groups and networks in order to cope with difficulties involved in the production, distribution and marketing as these

often are problematic for them (Vunisea, 1995). Vunisea, also points out the gradually changing attitude of women who are aiming to supply the market (Vunisea, 1995). Surplus now goes for consumption at home where as previously, surplus went to market. This increase in purchasing power also increases their dependence on imported foods that is bought from stores. This affects the dietary patterns away from natural foods towards the nutritionally inferior processed and convenience of foods.

Health and nutritional programmes must be integrated to raise awareness on such changing food habits and increase in nutritional vulnerability.

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