

Analysing the roles of men and women in the Marshall Islands' fisheries sector: Supporting opportunities to mainstream gender

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Abstract

A gender and fisheries analysis was conducted in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) to address the information gap regarding gender in their coastal fisheries sector. It was observed that at the community-level, traditional beliefs inhibiting women's active participation in certain fishing activities still exist, but over time Marshallese women are gradually partaking in fishing activities that were previously the domain of men. While men's fishing activities are usually for food and income, women's are mainly for household consumption. Across the coastal fisheries value chain, women are active in post-harvest processing activities, including preparing seafood and making shell craft jewellery, with the latter being an important income earner for the women involved. Several fisheries livelihood initiatives have been undertaken to support outer island communities, although these unconsciously engage more men than women due to traditional gender-delineated roles around fishing. Both men and women partake in community aquaculture ventures and community-based fisheries management, but their levels of participation and influence remains ambiguous and needs further investigation. Within the formal fisheries sector, women are now occupying senior leadership positions and technical roles within state and non-state institutions, but no formal mechanism exists to align their operations and programmes with RMI's gender equality commitments and policies. Enhancing collaboration between these institutions and the women's division within government and women-focused civil society organisations, and women's groups is needed to effectively mainstream gender across the RMI's fisheries sector.

Introduction

Fisheries is a key economic driver in the Pacific Islands region, with the offshore fisheries sector providing a lifeline for the economies of some Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). While offshore fisheries, especially the tuna industry, is often recognised for its economic contributions at the national level, coastal fisheries and aquaculture remains vital for a majority of PICTs whose communities are fisheries-dependent. Coastal fisheries provide the primary or secondary source of income for up to 50% of households in the region, and 50–90% of animal-sourced protein (SPC 2015).

Women partake in, and are vital contributors to, the fisheries sector, although most management and development ventures have traditionally focused on commercial fisheries, which are usually dominated by men, while less attention is given to subsistence fisheries and post-harvest processing where women are most actively involved (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). This is further reflected in the scarcity of literature that properly quantifies the contribution of women to this sector, and therefore, their contributions largely remain invisible and undervalued (Thomas et al. 2021).

A desktop study commissioned by the Pacific European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme identified the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) as one of the PICTs with no or very little information on gender issues in coastal fisheries (Laqeratabua unpubl.), thereby warranting a gender and fisheries analysis to address this information gap. Additionally, RMI participated in a regional workshop on gender and human rights issues in coastal fisheries and aquaculture organised by the Pacific Community (SPC) in 2020, in which RMI also identified the need for a gender and fisheries analysis to be conducted for the country.

Methodology

A variety of published information and data sources from government, non-government, intergovernmental agencies, as well as peer-reviewed studies spanning across different disciplines such as fisheries, gender, legislation and policies, human and national development, marine resource management, marine ecological studies, and nutrition and health were consulted in this research. For areas where published information was unavailable, unpublished information or information from key informants was sought.

Past gender and fisheries country assessment reports were also used to inform this process. Additionally, SPC's methodology for gender mainstreaming stocktakes at the country level was adapted to inform the sections on institutional and capacity analysis, including the review of policy frameworks.

Results and discussion

Socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects

Fish remains a vital food and income source for many Marshallese due to the country's limited land mass, but large exclusive economic zone of 2.1 million km² (MIMRA 2019). In RMI, fisheries is a key driver of economic development, contributing USD 31.3 million to the gross domestic product in 2020 (MIMRA 2020). This revenue is mainly derived from the tuna fishery, including both offshore and land-based activities, with Majuro being the world's busiest tuna transshipment hub (FAO 2021). There is, however, an increasing reliance on imported, processed food to sustain the population of 54,388³ (EPPSO 2022), most of whom reside in the urban centres of Majuro (56%) and Ebeye⁴ (19%), with the remaining 25% living in RMI's outer islands (RMI Government 2022). While the urban economies in Majuro

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3 Population is based on the 2019–2020 Household, Income and Expenditure survey (see EPPSO 2022).

4 Ebeye is the urban centre of Kwajalein Atoll.

and Kwajalein are mostly driven by government bureaucracy and Kwajalein military base (RMI Government 2021), outer island communities continue to rely on fishing and agriculture for food security while earning a living from copra and handcraft production coupled with limited commercial fishing and farming activities (RMI Government 2021).

In the past, there were strong culturally gender-delineated roles governing women's and men's fishing activities. For instance, Marshallese women's fishing activities were limited to the lagoon and inner reef areas as it was culturally considered taboo for women to go in boats or to engage in diving, netting, trapping, pole-and-line fishing or longlining (Tuara 1998). In contrast, men were not subjected to these limitations (Lambeth et al. 2014; Tuara 1998). Some explanations regarding these limitations on women's fishing activities included: 1) they were believed to bring bad luck and prevent a good catch; 2) they did not possess the required strength needed for more physical activities when fishing from boats; and 3) family obligations prevented them from joining fishing ventures.

In present day RMI, both men and women harvest fish and invertebrates, with women's fishing efforts still largely concentrated within the inshore areas (Pinca et al. 2009). A number of women are also engaged in clam farming, with some periodically involved in bottom fishing during recreational fishing competitions (Tuara 1998), or trolling from boats. According to Pinca et al. (2009), women fish in sheltered coastal reefs and lagoons, while men target a variety of habitats, including inshore areas and seaward to outer reefs and passages. For invertebrate collections, women gleaned on the reef tops and intertidal flats while men tended to dive for lobsters, clams or octopus (Pinca et al. 2009). While women do not dive for fish or invertebrates, they at times extend their invertebrate collections to deeper areas by wading out to ankle- and shoulder-depth waters. Men fish more frequently than women, with their catch designated for both food and income, while women's catch is mostly for household consumption (Pinca et al. 2009).

In line with regional trends, Marshallese women are active in the area of post-harvest processing across the fisheries value chain, including with seafood preparation and the making of shell-craft jewellery. The shell-craft sector provides an important income source not only for the women involved, but also for their households. Interestingly, women's gross earnings from fisheries were higher than that of men in 2017 (RMI Government 2018). Despite women's important financial contribution, several economic coastal fisheries development interventions in RMI's outer island communities are unconsciously biased towards men, with little or no participation by women. This is attributed to limitations governing women's fishing activities, and these will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Fisheries economic development and management initiatives

To develop its coastal fisheries sector, RMI's national fisheries agency – the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) – has undertaken several development interventions with outer island communities. This started in the late 1980s through the deployment of fish aggregating

devices (FADs), which later diversified to include the Outer Island Fish Market Centres (OIFMCs), aquaculture and other initiatives such as community-based fisheries management (Edwards 2021; MIMRA 2020; Pinca et al. 2009).

The OIFMCs programme involves MIMRA buying fresh fish (from fishers) which are then stored on ice and transported to urban centres to be resold to consumers in Majuro and Ebeye (MIMRA 2020; Pinca et al. 2009). This programme generated USD 124,182 across five atolls in 2020 for local fishers who have no reliable income source (MIMRA 2020). Given that men are usually the ones engaged in commercial fishing and accessing FADs, they are also most likely to directly derive an income from this programme compared to women. Although there have been anecdotal accounts of women selling fish caught at FADs, it is unclear whether this is a reliable source of income for the women involved, and needs to be ascertained.

Aquaculture production consists of a relatively steady but small production of giant clams, hard and soft corals for the aquarium trade, sporadic production of black pearls (Gillett 2016), and, more recently, moi (*Polydactylus sexfilis*) (MIMRA, 2020). The giant clam *Tridacna maxima* is the main species cultivated by outer island communities (Edwards 2021; MIMRA 2020), supporting 260 farmers who collectively earned over USD 6000 in 2019 from sales to Majuro-based export companies (MIMRA 2019). Further, clam farmers on Likiep Atoll have established an association whose membership includes women and men (Edwards 2021). While MIMRA has been expanding its work in the area of aquaculture, the participation of women, men and youth is not clearly indicated, particularly for the outer islands. Therefore, there is scope to explore women and youth participation in this area.

Management and decision-making

Control and access of natural resources – including fisheries resources and management – is influenced by Marshallese cultural values and traditional governance mechanisms. Traditionally, the Marshallese observe a matrilineal system of land ownership, which still exists in most islands, that granted women a high status in their community (Stege 2008). Land ownership through land parcels, called *wato*, encompasses both land and adjacent coastal areas, including the natural resources within these spaces (Stege 2008). Despite the matrilineal inheritance system, women now have limited authority to control and exercise their land rights (including marine areas rights), which have gradually been delegated to men (RMI Government 2015a). Thus, their once vested powers as landowners, decision-makers, peace-keepers and leaders have gradually been diluted and passed on to their brothers or other male relatives (Curtis 1992). Women, especially younger ones, are now less aware of their land rights and clanship relationships. This is further compounded by the disconnectedness they have with their *wato* due to outmigration from the outer islands to urban areas or to the United States.

Despite the presence of *watos*, decision-making powers regarding access to and use of coastal resources, including fisheries prohibitions, are no longer solely determined by

this. Local governments now have jurisdiction over resources within five nautical miles of their shores, with decisions being made under the guidance of traditional leaders, or *iroij* (Baker et al. 2011). Given that positions within RMI's local governments and chiefly roles are predominately held by men, few women participate in these higher-level, decision-making processes although they are impacted by the very outcomes of these decisions, including on coastal fisheries.

Sustainable coastal fisheries management is imperative to RMI due to the population's high reliance on fisheries resources coupled by its vulnerability to climate change impacts. The Reimaanlok National Conservation Area Plan (hereafter Reimaanlok Plan) was developed with an accompanying eight-step framework to support community-based resource management and to garner assistance from RMI's Protected Areas Network (Hess et al. 2012; Reimaan National Planning Team 2008). The Reimaanlok mechanism supports local governments in formulating fishery management plans and ordinances, as well as in harmonising efforts to streamline the effective implementation of community fisheries management programmes across the country (Baker et al. 2011; Hess et al. 2012). A key principle of the Reimaanlok process is to empower local communities – including men, women and youth – in sustainably managing their ecosystem by having representatives of these different social groups within each community's Local Resources Committee, with the most vocal women usually nominated into these committees. However, it needs to be further substantiated whether committee diversity equates to diverse voices and meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and does not unintentionally reinforce social norms that are disadvantageous.

Women in the formal fisheries sector

The fisheries sector is pivotal to RMI's economy, employing 10% of workers in the country (FAO 2021). While the focus of this study is on the coastal fishery, this section will also discuss the offshore fishery because it is the largest driver of formal employment in RMI's fisheries sector. MIMRA and private enterprises are the main stakeholders within this sector with the latter pre-dominantly engaged in the tuna industry.

As of April 2021, MIMRA employed 94 national staff, of which 78 are men and 16 are women, and 2 subnational staff who are both men (MIMRA unpublished data – April 2021). There are seven senior positions at MIMRA, employing three women and four men (MIMRA unpublished data – April 2021), and includes the director (a man) and two deputy directors (both women). More women undertake clerical work than men but there has been progress in the technical areas, with women engaged as observers on industrial tuna fleets and as scientific divers and expeditions leaders in the area of coastal fisheries. MIMRA also has community outreach programmes, including outer island fish-bases that are all managed by men, while their Ebeye and Majuro fish markets are staffed by both men and women. Some of the senior and technical positions that women occupy were previously only held by men.

Further, MIMRA has an internship programme that provides practical experience, and has proven to be a career

pathway for both women and men with an interest in fisheries. While MIMRA has the willingness and political will to mainstream gender, there is no formal mechanism to align its operations and programmes to RMI's national gender equality commitments and policies. MIMRA's organisational structure does not clearly define roles and responsibilities under current job descriptions, nor is there a clearly identified focal point for gender matters. Reporting mechanisms do not include specific gender reporting sections, and sex disaggregated data are only collected for certain activities (e.g. Reimaanlok process) but would benefit from a more systematic data collection approach.

Published information on gender relating to RMI's fisheries stakeholders in the private sector is scarce. It is understood that while men are employed in both land-based and offshore activities, including onboard fishing vessels, women are primarily engaged in land-based activities such as at fish processing factories. A study by Tuara and Passfield (2012) revealed that women dominate within tuna processing factories, working as unskilled labourers. One factory reported that 65% of its staff comprises women who are mainly responsible for loining tuna. Some women are involved in laboratory work to conduct quality control tasks (e.g. water quality, histamine levels, hazard analysis and critical control points), but the majority of these positions are filled by overseas recruits because few locals have the required skills (Tuara and Passfield 2012).

Other RMI-based institutions that engage directly with the fisheries sector include the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), which is the secretariat responsible for managing the world's largest sustainable tuna purse-seine fishery. PNA's current chief executive officer is a woman, and several other women are part of the senior management team. The local non-government organisation, Marshall Islands Conservation Society, works closely with coastal communities and collaborates with MIMRA to support the Reimaanlok process. Its current executive director is also a woman.

Policies and commitments supporting gender equality across the fisheries sector

RMI continues to take steps towards progressing gender equality through various gender policies and commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED) (2012), and the Pacific Platform for Action and Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (2018–2030). The platform has 13 critical areas of which one is on agriculture and fishing and is aligned with the PLGED, a high-level declaration that reinforces the commitment of Pacific leaders to progress with gender-responsive government programmes, including fisheries.

At the national level, there are two key gender equality instruments: the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy (2015) and the 2019 Gender Equality Act. The Gender Mainstreaming Policy calls for a strategic action to “identify markets and support the development of value-chains for agriculture and fisheries outputs produced by women”, in order to enable “women's equitable participation in, and benefit from, economic development” (RMI Government 2015b). The policy further states that women's and men's

contributions to fisheries requires promotion and support because their gendered roles enhance food security and rural development.⁵ While the policy has not been renewed due to the adoption of the Gender Equality Act, its content is still being referred to in national strategic documents.

The Gender Equality Act promotes gender mainstreaming across all sectors, and at all levels. A strong theme in the act is the call for the adoption of special measures to counterbalance the underrepresentation of women and girls in public, political and economic realms, especially in decision-making processes. The act also acknowledges additional needs for women in the informal economy and calls for the promotion of women's economic empowerment through a range of support services. Despite the Gender Equality Act's progressive agenda, its implementation is weak and the procedures for its enforcement through additional regulations are vague and open to interpretation. Further, there is also no reference to the use of, access to, and control over natural resources, nor does it cover more specific fisheries-related topics.

Aside from gender-specific policies and commitments, other existing sectorial instruments that promote gender equality to RMI's fisheries include:

- National Strategic Plan 2020–2030, which has the overall objective of “sustainable, equitable and measurable development;
- MIMRA Strategic Plan, which supports the empowerment of local communities in sustainable resource management through community-based consultations using the Reimaanlok process;
- Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up CBFM, 2021–2025, Objective 5.2 focuses on inclusivity and equitability in decision-making and benefits;
- New Song for Coastal Fisheries: The Noumea Strategy (2015) emphasises the underrecognised contributions of women and youth, and calls for their greater participation in decision-making regarding coastal resources and more equitable access to those resources;
- Reimaanlok Plan and Framework is a mechanism whereby both men and women participate in community consultations and as members of their respective Local Resources Committee; and
- Convention on Biological Diversity recognises the vital role women play in sustainable biodiversity management and affirms their need to fully participate at all levels of policy-making and implementation concerning biodiversity conservation.

For fisheries stakeholders, there is a high uptake on gender commitments and policies associated with fisheries and biodiversity outcomes such as the MIMRA Strategic Plan and the Reimaanlok Plan and Framework because these are the ones that stakeholders are most familiar with, and which is closely aligned with their sector deliverables.

Harnessing institutional support and applying approaches to mainstream gender and enhance women's participation in decision-making on coastal fisheries

To effectively mainstream gender across RMI's fisheries sector, policy implementation and harnessing support from state and non-state institutions is vital. This includes fostering stronger collaborations between MIMRA and the women's division within government and women-focused civil society organisations, and other groups to meaningfully engage women in fisheries and/or enhance their interest in fisheries. Some institutions (formal and semi-formal) that can further support gender mainstreaming in fisheries include:

- Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs, which is responsible for matters pertaining to culture, local communities and women;
- Women's United Marshall Islands, a local women-led non-governmental organisation whose goal is to advance the causes of, and improve the lives of, Marshallese women and their families;
- Locally based higher education institutions such as College of the Marshall Islands and the University of the South Pacific RMI Campus that provides a platform to train women and men to join the formal fisheries sector through marine-related and fisheries courses;
- Jo-Jikum, an advocacy group whose work centres on awareness raising of crucial issues facing Marshallese Islanders such as climate change and environmental pollution; and
- Marshall Islands Billfish Club, which conducts annual fishing competitions.

While working with the above-mentioned institutions is a progressive initial step, other approaches need to be applied to encourage women's equitable participation in decision-making on coastal fisheries. Apart from engaging the women's division within government and women-focused non-governmental organisations, some inclusive practices that MIMRA employs during community consultations for the Reimaanlok process include:

- using inclusive terminology – the word “fishing” in traditional Marshallese language has gender connotations and is usually associated with men's fishing activities;
- setting up women's stakeholder groups – this is undertaken at the beginning of the consultation process to provide a platform for women's participation at important community fisheries discussions; and
- timing of consultations – to accommodate women's busy schedule during the day, consultations with women's groups are planned for the evenings.

To help inform the Reimaanlok process, MIMRA also collects baseline information through ecological and socioeconomic surveys. The socioeconomic surveys contain

5 See page 14 of RMI's National Gender Mainstreaming Policy, Priority Outcome 4.

certain sex-disaggregated information related to a household or community, but with limited gender-related information on marine resource usage and/or associated management. Currently, the survey includes over-arching questions on marine species important to a community, which is usually associated with charismatic species caught by men, including their proposed management. Information on women's handicraft activities is also collected, including the species used for shell craft, but this information is not often used to inform community fisheries management interventions. Therefore, incorporating information on, and management measures of, species that are important to women would increase their interest in participating in the Reimaanlok consultations, thereby garnering their buy-in.

To boost community engagement, MIMRA has been logging information on the communities they have worked with, and are exploring effective tools that communities can use to collect and send relevant information to MIMRA. A consulting firm has also been engaged to develop a Reimaanlok monitoring toolkit, mainly focusing on marine resources. Incorporating social dimensions into this toolkit will improve the monitoring of any progress made through the Reimaanlok mechanism using a gender lens.

Conclusion and key recommendations

While there is a willingness to mainstream gender across RMI's fisheries sector, there is limited technical capacity within MIMRA and among fisheries stakeholders to undertake this. Several key recommendations to support MIMRA and associated fisheries stakeholders to mainstream gender across the fisheries sector include strengthening collaborations with the women's division within government agencies and women-focused civil society groups, as well as government line ministries, including the Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs and Women United Together Marshall Islands. Stronger relationships with educational institutions to enhance the promotion of fisheries as a career pathway for women, men, girls and boys is also imperative.

Additionally, there needs to be an investment in gender and social inclusion (GSI) training for MIMRA's coastal fisheries and aquaculture teams to increase their understanding of GSI and provide basic skills for GSI mainstreaming.

There is also a need for MIMRA to identify potential, complementary or alternative livelihood ventures to promote outer island women's economic engagement, including aquaculture options, and for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce to enhance women's economic empowerment in the handicraft sector (shell craft). Further assessment of the existing OIFMC programme and how it can be improved to adopt a GSI lens is needed. Additionally, to improve women's economic empowerment—especially in the areas of post-harvest handling, processing and value-adding of marine resources – their training needs should be identified.

In conclusion, there needs to be an improved understanding of site-based implementation of the Reimaanlok framework from a GSI lens, including costs and benefits; governance structures; operational processes; and conflict resolution systems. Applying inclusive participatory approaches by incorporating information on species management that are important to women during Reimaanlok consultations, will help to garner women's support and buy-in. Finally, it is critical to ensure meaningful engagement with both young women and men, particularly in the outer islands, so that they understand that they are valuable environmental stewards of their community.

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