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Advancing Gender Equality for Equitable Livelihoods in Coral Reef Social-ecological Systems

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Tetepare women count seagrass as part of the conservation programme of the Tetepare Descendants Association. Western Province, Solomon Islands. © Jürgen Freund / WWF

Background

Worldwide, more than 500 million women and men are reliant on coral reefs for their livelihoods (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2019). Yet, climate change is modifying coral reefs and reef-associated communities, affecting the well-being of people dependent on these social-ecological systems (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2019). The ways people experience and respond to these changes is shaped by gender – the social expectations about what it means to be a woman or man. Gender shapes a person's capacity to access and control assets, make and influence decisions, and participate in, or benefit from, policies and programmes seeking to assist communities to overcome social, ecological, and economic changes. Gender inequality persists the world over. Addressing persistent inequalities and programming for greater equality is a foundation of sustainable, equitable and resilient livelihoods in coral reef social-ecological systems.

This brief is intended for policymakers and policy influencers in national, multilateral and funding agencies who are committed to advancing gender equality in coral reef social-ecological systems. It provides recommendations relevant to those working in coral reef related sectors including fisheries, conservation, food systems, blue economy, climate change adaptation and resilience, area-based management, sustainable development, and disaster risk reduction. The coral reef related policies to which this brief refers is broad – including formal global, regional, and national conventions, laws, plans and regulations; internal policies, procedures and processes of funders and implementing agencies; and sub-national and community level policies and plans for sustainable development and management.

Gender equality is a necessary foundation on which to build equitable and sustainable livelihoods in coral reef social-ecological systems. Gender is a social construct that defines what it means to be a man or women, boy or girl in a given society – it carries specific roles, status and expectations within households, communities, and cultures (CARE, 2019). The roles of women and men, how they experience social, economic, or environmental change, and their opportunities to respond, adapt or adjust to this change is shaped by these societal definitions and expectations. The influence of gender interacts with other social factors, including poverty, ability, age and ethnicity. In many instances, women's access to, and control over, productive assets (i.e., the natural resources, income or technology a person has available to them to support their livelihood) are different and more limited than men's, undermining their capacity to adapt to social-ecological changes (Cohen et al., 2016; Lawless et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2017). This means that women tend to experience poverty more intensely (Rao et al., 2021). Gender also shapes how people can engage with and experience policies and programmes seeking to assist communities navigate and overcome social-ecological change. Women tend to have less voice and influence in decision-making processes and are significantly underrepresented in leadership over natural resources and disaster response. Moreover, in aquatic resource dependent communities, research has found men tend to have greater flexibility to participate in adapted livelihoods or alternative livelihood initiatives (Cohen et al., 2016; Locke et al., 2017).

- Gender equality is an end in itself (i.e., intrinsic goal) and a means to multiply the impact of sectoral outcomes (e.g., improved conservation or environmental outcomes).
- Advancing gender equality is critical for improving livelihoods of the women and men who live in close association with coral reefs.
- Gender equality commitments should be enshrined in policies (laws, procedures, and processes) related to coral reef social-ecological systems.
- To address persistent inequalities, policies need to actively address and transform the invisible root causes of gender inequality by going 'below the waterline'.
- Gender inequalities must be addressed at individual, household, communal, organizational, and societal scales.
- Methodologies, tools, and gender transformative approaches are available to identify and pursue opportunities for greater gender equality and improved livelihoods.



Felicitas Bansiloy, an entrepreneur and beneficiary of a CARE loan in the Philippines. ©Peter Caton/CARE

Coral reef related policies have the potential to support and promote approaches that transform gender and social norms and beliefs that perpetuate inequalities. Policy approaches include those that challenge discriminatory gender and social norms and beliefs, and that avoid and overcome exclusionary practices. Removing these invisible barriers is a necessary step towards more resilient and equitable livelihoods, and as a step towards gender equality as an end in itself. **There is a need for deeper and more effective integration of gender equality in policy itself.** Many policies that impact upon the social or ecological elements of coral reefs (e.g., climate change mitigation and adaptation, fisheries management, conservation of biodiversity and habitats) are gender-blind and even completely overlook contributions women make to resource governance, income generation and food supply (Kleiber et al., 2013; Lau et al., 2021; Lawless et al., 2021). As a result, these policies fail to acknowledge or address the causes of gender inequality, thus sustaining that inequality.

There is tendency for policies to focus on addressing the symptoms of gender equality, for instance, what women and men have and do (e.g., access to assets such as fishing gear, participation in training) and fail to address the deeper underlying structural barriers to gender equality (Lau & Ruano-Chamorro, 2021). The former considerations are considered ‘above the waterline’ (Figure 1). **In both formulation and implementation, these policies need to deliberately address the root causes of gender inequality, those ‘below the waterline’** (Figure 1). These root causes or ‘leverage points’ for change refer to **structures: deep-seated and invisible social and gender norms, systems, and policies** (McDougall et al., 2021). At present, these underlying structures are too frequently unrecognized and unaddressed by policy (Lau et al. 2021). If left unaddressed, these structures will continue to produce and re-produce unequal relations and outcomes, meaning the benefits or empowerment that the ‘above the waterline’ efforts had hoped and planned for may not eventuate for women, or may even result in backlash.

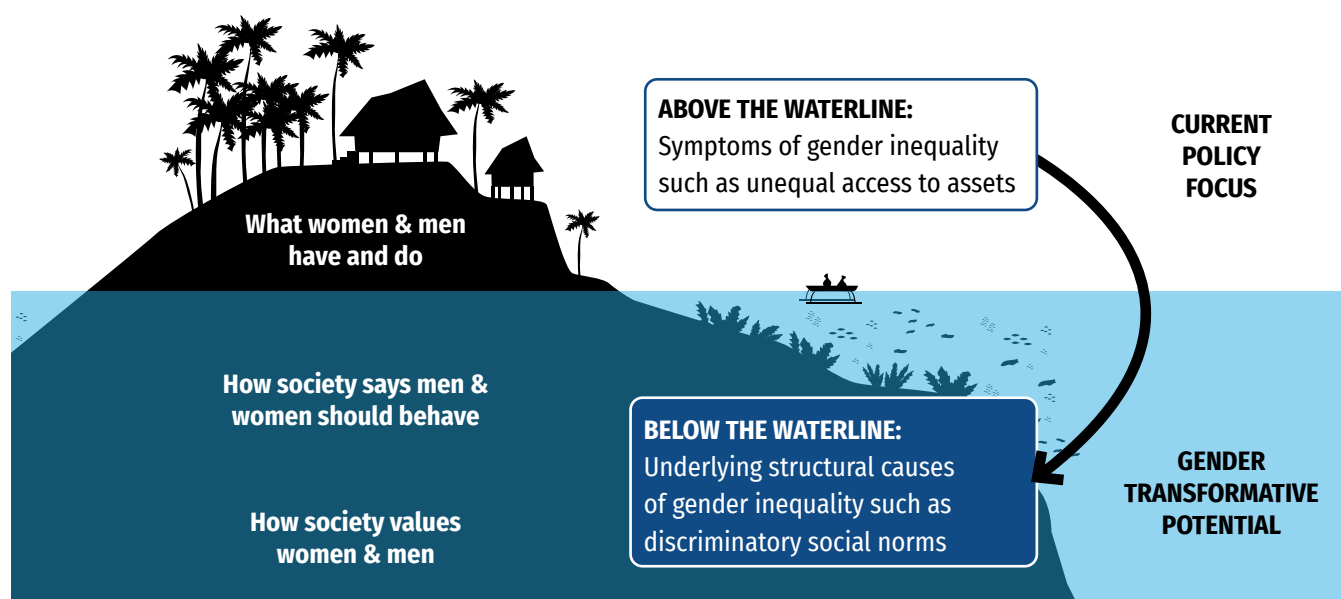


Figure 1. Coral reef atoll illustrating that most coral reef related policies tend to focus only on gender issues ‘above the waterline’ (adapted from Lau et al. 2021). To enable the conditions for gender transformation, policies need to focus also on the issues below the waterline, which refer to the root cause of gender inequalities, for instance, the more invisible norms and power relations.

Ways policymakers and influencers can work toward addressing gender inequality 'below the waterline' in coral reef social-ecological systems.

Gender inequalities are produced and reinforced at multiple scales - from whole of society all the way down to individuals within households. These scales are nested and are influenced by each other. **Policies intending to enhance equality need**

to consider gender inequalities that are perpetuated (and so can be addressed) at each of the individual, household, communal, organisational and global scales in different ways (Figure 2).

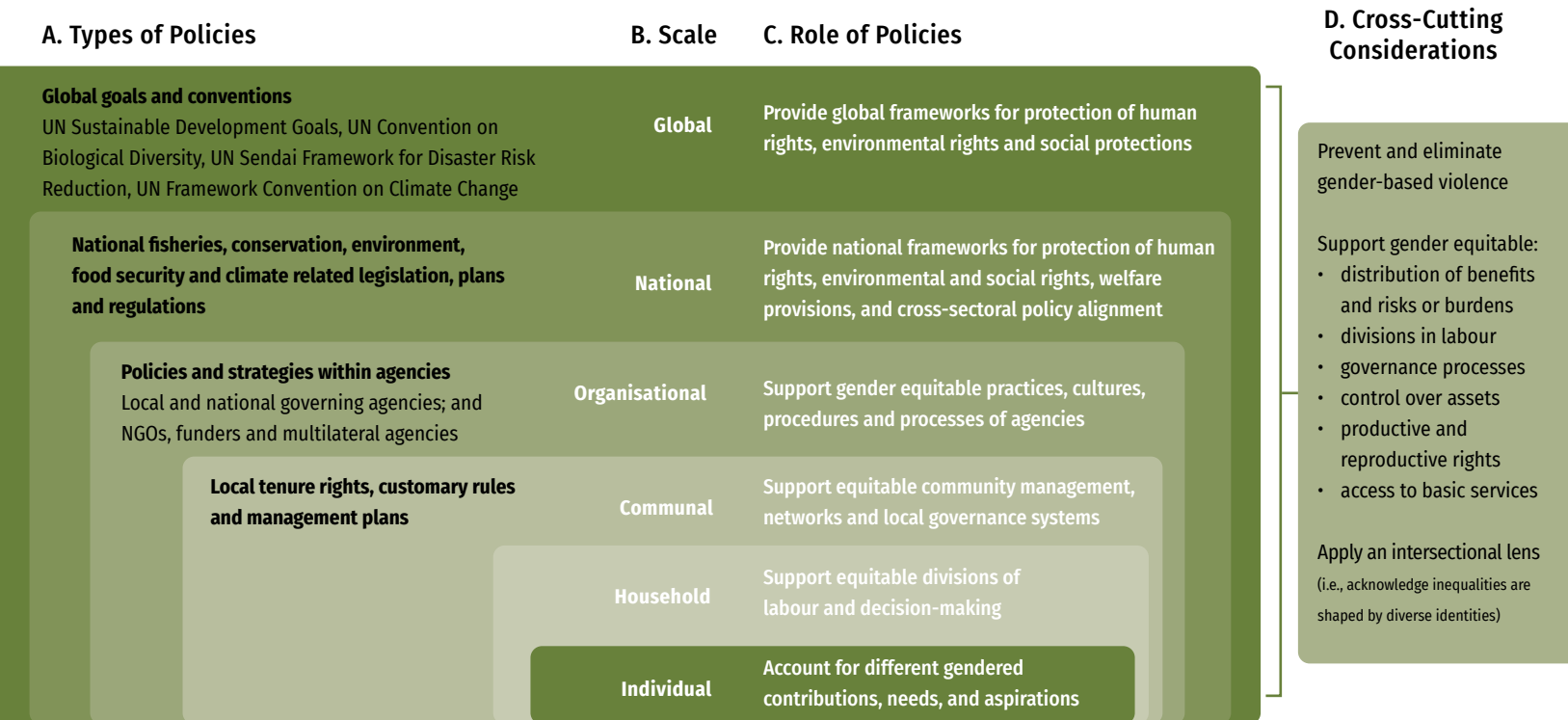


Figure 2. Examples of the a) types of policies, laws, procedures and processes at b) different scales, c) their role in enabling the conditions for gender transformation and d) cross-cutting considerations across all scales.

Consider how policies support gender equality as a goal, in and of itself. Research suggests that when gender equality is framed and pursued as an intrinsic goal, where equity and justice are important goals in and of themselves, there is a greater likelihood of associated gender commitments and approaches leading toward equitable improvements (Lau, 2020; Lawless et al., 2021). Pursuing gender equality as an end goal, tends to balance above the waterline and below the waterline approaches. By contrast, when gender equality is pursued as means to another end (e.g., to enhance conservation outcomes or economic gains) there is a lower likelihood of making meaningful progress toward equality – because superficial and/or ‘above the waterline’ approaches tend to be pursued (Lawless et al., 2021).

Ensure policies engage with, and reflect, gender considerations ‘below the waterline’. In general, this includes the more invisible aspects of gender inequality, including the norms embedded in formal and informal institutions (structures), nested in the mind (agency), and produced and reproduced through social interactions (relations). Gender transformative policy thus implies tracking of gender data and closing gender gaps. For example, ensuring coral reef associated livelihoods are understood using sex- and age-disaggregated data can make some invisible values visible. Collecting sex-disaggregated data allows for the measurement of differences between women and men on various social and economic dimensions and is a fundamental and basic first step in integrating gender issues into monitoring and evaluation of

gender equality (CARE, 2019c). Shifting focus to supporting gender equality 'below the waterline' must also address critical policy issues such as human and environmental rights, gender equal land and water rights, and prevention and elimination of gender-based violence. There are several resources that can provide more detailed guidance on promoting gender transformative norms, systems and policies (see for example McDougall et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2021).

Recognize that gender equality is not simply a focus on women. One aspect of this is recognizing intersectionality - women and men and people of other genders are not homogenous groups. They have many intersecting identities, including age, wealth, ability, ethnicity and more. These interact with gender to create specific needs as well as context-specific vulnerabilities in each coral reef social-ecological system. For example, women or men who have migrated for marriage and do not possess tenure rights are generally less able to make decisions about the use and management of natural resources affecting their ability to adapt to the effects of social-ecological change (Lawless et al., 2019). Another aspect is the recognition that gender equality is everyone's responsibility and will only be achieved through engaging both women and men (and people of all genders) in addressing inequalities. This means policymakers and processes need to **attend to the ways in which men, masculinities and gender relations play in upholding inequalities – and specifically engage men as change agents.**

Enable policy-making processes themselves to be gender equitable. Critically reflect on who is making and influencing policies – are gender-balanced and diverse voices represented? It is important to **build the individual and collective agency of women in decision-making bodies.** From a transformative perspective this may imply a need to challenge and dismantle structural barriers in representation and decision-making bodies themselves, including by illuminating and addressing unconscious bias and systems that tilt in favour of more powerful individuals or groups. Workplace self-assessment, reflection, and training tools, such as those used in the health sector, can be useful in undertaking such analysis (see for example Global Health 50/50, and its related and relevant framework, Global Food 50/50, 2021 or CARE's Social Analysis and Action tool).

Design equitable policy-development processes that balance top-down commitment to gender equality with bottom-up inclusion and accountability. Bottom-up policy formulations

can ensure **the needs, aspirations and concerns of all people connected to coral reefs are represented.** Inclusive dialogues and citizen-led accountability mechanisms can assist the identification of intersectional inequalities (i.e., a diversity of identities) to ensure marginalized perspectives are adequately captured (CARE, 2019b). This process can bring greater recognition to voices 'from the ground' and **promote women's inclusion in policy-making** (ICWR, 2018).

Policies need to engage with and integrate cross-cutting gender equality issues mandated at higher scales. This requires **connecting coral reef related policies and programmes to laws and policies that support gender equality and women's empowerment,** for example national gender-based violence prevention policies. Gender-based violence can prevent women's access to essential information and support and inclusion in livelihood programmes.

Gender policy commitments need to translate into action. This translation can be supported by ensuring **adequate funding, resources, leadership buy-in, and longer programme timeframes to support genuinely transformative change** (see iterative project cycle in Lau et al., 2021). In the short term, this may mean working in partnership with national governments, development agencies, and civil society groups with gender expertise to strengthen and transfer gender capacity. **Connecting with civil society groups working on gender-based issues** can help to ensure policies adequately capture the nature and depth of action required to address gender inequalities (ICWR, 2018). In the long term, these efforts need to be supported by prioritizing **training and capacity building** for those formulating policies, and designing and implementing programmes.

Regular evaluation of policies to track progress, and assess transformational change are important points for reflection in enabling gender transformative change (see iterative project cycle in Lau et al., 2021). Through this process it is possible to **assess the extent policies (i.e., their aims and outcomes) are gender transformative** by utilizing established methodologies and assessment tools. Examples include gender policy analysis methodologies (e.g., Lawless et al., 2021), and the application of gender assessment criteria such as the gender integration continuum (IGWG, 2017), the 'reach, benefit, empower, transform' assessment framework (Johnson et al., 2018; Kleiber et al., 2019), the Women's Empowerment in Fisheries Index (FISH, 2021) or the Gender Marker tool (CARE, 2019a).

Recommendations for enabling gender transformative change through coral reef related policies

1. Enable the conditions for gender transformative change by identifying and addressing the informal and formal root causes of gender inequality both above and below the waterline. 'Above the waterline' conditions require building agency, and 'below the waterline' include changing relations and transforming structures.
2. Seek to prevent and eliminate gender-based violence and support the protection of human and environmental rights at all scales of policy, including through gender equitable distribution of opportunities, benefits and risks; divisions in labour; governance processes; representation of all voices; control over assets; productive and reproductive rights; and access to basic services.
3. Connect to existing gender equality laws, regulations or cross-cutting goals in other sectors.
4. Consider how policies support gender equality as a goal, in and of itself. When gender equality is framed and pursued as an intrinsic goal, there is a greater likelihood of associated gender commitments and approaches leading toward equitable improvements.
5. Ensure that policy-making processes themselves are gender equitable, ensuring a diversity of voices represented and balance top-down commitment to gender equality with bottom-up inclusion. Inclusive dialogues and citizen-led accountability mechanisms facilitate the inclusion of perspectives of marginalised communities.
6. Translate gender equality commitments into action by ensuring adequate funding, resources, and timeframes, and connecting civil society groups with gender expertise to strengthen and transfer gender capacity.
7. Collect and use gender data and information for decision-making and organisational change and invest in research and knowledge generation for gender transformative development and conservation practice.
8. Assess the extent to which coral reef associated policies are gender transformative by utilizing established methodologies and assessment tools listed in this brief.

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