

Women have nothing to do with fish, or do they?

A. Ride¹

Women are not well represented in what might be considered conventional places of power and authority.

This is the second installment of a three-part series of blogs about the challenges that face the people of Malaita in the Solomon Islands, and the steps they are taking to secure their future in partnership with WorldFish and local organisations.

What would you imagine would be the key topics of a stakeholder consultation for a program on aquatic agricultural systems? Making money from fish and farming? Yes. Sustainability? Yes. But also one of the key topics is gender, perhaps a surprise given that the participants in the CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems (AAS) stakeholder consultation held 6–9 November 2012 were from, and talking about, an island that has among one of the most traditional parts of the Solomon Islands — Malaita.

In the words of the Malaita Chazon Development Authority Director Patrick Taloboe, “we all know its women who manage money well and can develop villages”. However, women are not well represented in what might be considered conventional places of power and authority — parliament and traditional chiefly governance systems. At the same time Malaitan women are often vocal advocates for their causes, leading national and local NGOs and they are also highly successful managers of some of the best known Solomon businesses.

But what has this to do with a research program on aquatic agricultural systems? Well quite a lot according to gender champion Ranjitha Puskur, senior scientist at WorldFish. She describes how the AAS program aims to approach gender in a different way to some initiatives that have gone before: “AAS has a big emphasis on gender. Most projects aim to integrate gender into their activities; AAS has ambitions to take it a step beyond and



Women removing the shell from mangrove mudshells in Malaita, Solomon Islands. Photo by Wade Fairley, 2012.

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catalyse transformational change. For example experience has shown that you might give women access to technology or credit but is that really benefiting women and contributing to household well-being if they don't have control over it and are not able to make decisions about how they use the income those inputs generate? Often agricultural research shies away from those more complex areas involving addressing social norms and attitudes, with people identifying this as a social change agenda. They ask: Is that really part of your organisations mission? But now we realise that if you don't address causes of inequalities leading to differential access to technologies, markets, inputs and services for men and women, or understand how decisions are made in the household, you will not achieve a sustainable outcome."

How to do it this? One of the things is to look at what has worked in other development sectors like health and education to bring about transformational change in gender roles, norms and attitudes, says Ranjitha: "For example World Vision is using a method called 'channels of hope' in Solomon Islands to address gender based violence, so we would like to explore opportunities to work together with such partners to learn from and adapt what they have been doing, to the aquatic-agricultural sector. At the stakeholder consultations it nevertheless came out as a key issue — many people were concerned about the high levels of gender based violence and how gender issues had implications for nutrition, health and livelihood issues".

For Clera Rikimani, head of the women's division of the Malaita Provincial Government there is great need to focus not just on women, but on disadvantaged women in development work: "There are two sorts of women — those that are comfortable with their husband and family; they are better off than women who stay without family, I found problems come up when the family is in bad shape, mummy and daddy separate for example. So, in my work I concentrate now on women who really need the help — single mothers and widows". Because their need is greater, they also tend to respond to capacity building and training



*Paddling for mudshells in Malaita, Solomon Islands.
Photo by Wade Fairley, 2012.*

better says Clera: "One thing I found before with women who are comfortable, there is no incentive to change, you give them training, then next time another training but everything is just the same! I found the moment I shifted to the other women to raise them up I had a good experience doing things, they responded well, even to the extent that one woman is running a small business now. I found with those sorts of women any advice you give them has a big impact on their life".

One thing that came through in the community consultations for the Aquatic Agricultural Systems program is that men and women may have different motivations for getting involved in managing aquatic agricultural systems. Men look more at the land and sea for ways to make income, but women, were often more worried about how the land and

sea could provide adequate nutrition for their children. This mix of needs and visions for land and sea in Malaita will provide an important balance as the AAS program goes forward.

At the AAS Program's stakeholder consultation that involved government, NGOs and other stakeholders perhaps the least controversial item of discussion was the idea that women were a

central part of rural livelihoods and needed to be empowered to enhance their incomes and nutrition. So maybe those old ideas about women having nothing to do with fish, for example being bad luck to go out fishing, have indeed changed, leaving the way ready for development of aquatic agricultural systems that benefits men, women and the next generation.

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