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Exploring gender inclusion in small-scale fisheries management and development in Melanesia

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ABSTRACT

Fisheries, like other sectors, is not immune to gender inequality, and women tend to experience the brunt of inequality as undervalued and underrepresented actors in fisheries management and development. A comprehensive understanding of the gender approaches in use, including potential barriers to their implementation, is needed to promote gender equitable outcomes in the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector. We conducted interviews with fisheries managers and practitioners working in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu between 2018 and 2019. We found gender inclusive approaches were broadly applied in three ways: (a) through community-based projects and programs (e.g., inclusive participation techniques); (b) national level research and policy; and (c) internal organizational operations (e.g. gender-sensitive recruitment policies). Although fisheries organizations approached gender inclusion in diverse ways, when critically evaluated according to gender best practice we found 76.2% of approaches were designed to 'reach' women, and very few 'benefited', 'empowered', or 'transformed' women's lives. 'Gender' was conflated to 'women' indicating a poor understanding of what gender inclusion means in practice. We found gender inclusive approaches were limited by the knowledge and capacities of fisheries managers and practitioners, and inhibitive institutional cultures. We argue that SSF organizations need to build explicit institutional gender commitment, strategies and systematic efforts to implement gender approaches with effective accountability mechanisms in place. While the fisheries sector is in its infancy, the plethora and diversity of development organizations in the Pacific provides a unique opportunity to build strategic partnerships to improve gender inclusion in practice in SSF management and development. Such a step can assist the transition from gender inclusive approaches being 'new' to the 'norm' whilst setting a benchmark for what is acceptable practice.

1. Introduction

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are critical to the provision of food and nutrition security and the livelihoods of coastal communities worldwide [1]. Like other sectors, fisheries is not gender neutral or immune to gender inequality [2,3]. Women make up an estimated 47% of workers (56 million women) in the SSF sector operating along fisheries value chains worldwide [1], and contribute to around half of the annual coastal fisheries catch in the Pacific [4,5]. Global estimates of women's annual catch of marine fish and invertebrates is approximately 2.9 million tonnes with a landed value of US$5.6 billion [3]. Despite women's substantial involvement and contributions, fisheries management and development have historically focused on commercial, high-value fisheries (dominated by men), and less on subsistence, low-valued fisheries (dominated by women). Until recently, there had been a disproportionate skew towards the capture side of fisheries, with less attention on post-harvest activities (e.g. processing, value adding, sales) where women often are most active [6–9]. Furthermore, gender norms shaped by cultural and social expectations of women have meant women's contribution to the sector are often unpaid, part-time, opportunistic, and viewed as an extension of household duties [10,11]. This results in women being under-represented in decision-making around fisheries, and having inequitable access to natural, social and material resources [11,12]. The exclusion or marginalization of women has negative implications for individual and community wellbeing as well coastal management outcomes [13]. For example, gendered social and cultural norms and relations may impact the way communities innovate and adapt to change and address some of the increasing pressures on

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fisheries resources [14].

Efforts to address gender inequality, particularly women's marginalization in the fisheries sector, are building momentum. For example, The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) released the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (hereafter 'SSF Guidelines') to provide consensus principles and guidance particularly targeted towards developing countries, to improve the management of SSF (FAO, 2015). Core to this, Principle 4 states that "gender equality and equity is fundamental to any development" and "recognizing the vital role of women in small-scale fisheries, equal rights and opportunities should be promoted" [15]. In other words, the advancement of gender equality is necessary to achieve sustainable fisheries outcomes. To provide further guidance on Principle 4, FAO released a handbook *Towards gender-equitable small-scale fisheries governance and development* (hereafter 'SSF Gender Handbook') to better understand and illustrate through case studies: gender concepts and the role of women in SSF; responsible fisheries and sustainable development through a gender lens; and how to ensure an enabling environment for gender equality and its implementation [11].

The SSF Guidelines and the SSF Gender Handbook are broad and non-prescriptive in their guidance around the implementation of Principle 4. While this is important to allow application and adaption to different social, cultural and political contexts, and to ensure buy in by member states [16], there is limited knowledge, experience and examples of the practical application of the guidelines for state (i.e. government) and non-state actors (e.g. non-government organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations, academia, private sector). Consequently, how gender equality as a principle is being implemented in the SSF sector in different countries or regions are largely unknown.

In the Pacific Islands, a region with high reliance on SSF, there have been preliminary efforts to: (1) understand the factors shaping the adoption (or lack of adoption) of gender equality commitments by national governments [e.g. 17–19]; (2) produce a series of national stocktakes of the gender mainstreaming efforts of Pacific Island governments [e.g. 20–22]; and (3) conduct national gender and fisheries analyses [e.g. 23–25]. However, stocktakes have largely focused on national frameworks that support or constrain gender mainstreaming into the sector, rather than examining the gender performance of specific sectors. The need to address gender inequality in the fisheries sector is gaining significant attention in the region as evidenced by the articles in the Pacific Community's (SPC) *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin*, and the launch of the 45 million euro Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership which has established a unit to integrate gender and broader human rights-based approaches into all aspects of the program. A *Pacific handbook for gender equity and social inclusion in coastal fisheries and aquaculture* was launched by SPC to assist managers and practitioners include gender and broader human rights-based approaches into their sectors [26] and is being used to train and sensitize regional organizations [27,28].

Despite these advances, context specific and comprehensive understandings of the specific approaches and barriers to 'gender inclusion' within fisheries projects and programs (particularly those delivering services to rural areas) and application in practice, is lacking in the Pacific. Gender inclusion is the concept or belief that all establishments, services and opportunities, are open to all people without bias and not determined by gender stereotypes, norms and expectations. Gender inclusive approaches consider differences in roles, responsibilities, experiences, obligations, needs, rights, and power relations associated with being female or male, the opportunities associated with particular projects and programs, and if organizational practices are fair and equitable [29]. Therefore, it is critical to understand the approaches used and barriers faced by fisheries organizations (both state and non-state) who are newly tasked with the implementation of gender inclusive approaches that promote equality rather than exploit, reinforce or further widen gender disparities. Examination of projects and programs, as well as organizational practice is crucial to understanding the extent to which gender is valued, and becomes part of institutional culture and normative environments [30,31].

Our study seeks to understand gender inclusion in practice to determine opportunities for better social and economic outcomes for SSF. Specifically, we examine SSF management and development practice in Melanesia, a region comprised of large-ocean states with high dependence on SSF for household nutritional security, livelihoods [32], and cultural practice [33]. Using comparative national case studies, we assess the gender inclusive approaches applied within projects, programs and fisheries organizations, and the perceived barriers for gender inclusion in SSF in Melanesia. Our approach recognizes that fisheries projects and programs cannot be examined as distinct from the organizational culture and environments of actors who deliver or implement them [30,31].

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study context

Our study was conducted in three Melanesian countries – Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. National annual per capita consumption of fish is similar in these countries and ranges from 20.7 kg (Fiji) to 33.0 kg (Solomon Islands, Vanuatu) [32], and contributions of SSF (subsistence and commercial) to national GDP in 2014 was US$63.8 million (FJ $1 = US$0.48), US$47.9 (SBD$1 = US$0.14) and US$13.9 (VUV$1 = US $0.01) for Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, respectively [34]. In these countries women are also reported to provide a disproportionate contribution of seafood catch (approximately 80%) to communities' annual subsistence needs [35]. Consequently, the comparison of these countries is useful for providing an analysis of gender approaches within the sector.

The Pacific region has a number of regional organizations mandated by Pacific Island governments to coordinate policy advice and provide technical expertise, support and resources to their countries and territories. Regional organizations such as SPC, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, Pacific Islands Development Forum, and the University of the South Pacific, work and invest in gender and SSF in different capacities (i.e. research, policy, practice) within the scope of their mission. In addition, there are numerous United Nations (UN) agencies (e.g. FAO, UN Development Programme, UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)), and international (e.g. Conservation International, Live and Learn, Wildlife Conservation Society, WorldFish and the World Wide Fund for Nature) and local NGOs which engage, to different degrees, in gender and fisheries management and development regionally and/or nationally in Melanesia.

2.2. Study sample and design

We conducted 68 interviews with key informants working on SSF to elicit an understanding of gender inclusion approaches applied within projects, programs and organizations. Our investigation also sought to understand both perceived and actual capacity for gender inclusion, and the main barriers to gender inclusive practice. Key informants were representatives of government ministries or authorities (n = 15), local (n = 7) and international NGOs (n = 18), and regional organizations (n = 11) and global agencies (n = 5) working on SSF regionally, or in at least one of the three study countries (Table 1). To obtain gender balance in the sampling design, we selected a female and a male informant for interview from each organization where possible (39 women, 29 men interviewed). Independent consultants and researchers (academic and non-academic) working on SSF at national and/or regional levels (n = 12) were also interviewed and listed as 'experts'. We took a stratified approach to ensure informants represented all levels of SSF management (i.e., global, regional, and national) through a process of

Table 1
Gender capacity and access to expertise (experts, organizations) and training over the last 12 months for fisheries organizations, managers and practitioners.

Type	Respondents		Experience (years)		Gender focal point	Qualified gender focal point	Gender training	Gender capacity ranking		
	#W	#M	Fisheries	Gender				P	G/P	G
Fiji										
Experts	4	3	24.1 (7–33)	25.1 (4–33)	–	–	14%	0%	100%	0%
Government	4	2	10.5 (6–20)	4.0 (1–10)	33%	0%	0%	17%	33%	50%
LNGO	4	1	23.4 (9–50)	10.8 (5–25)	80%	0%	40%	0%	20%	80%
INGO	5	3	9.3 (0–20)	9.9 (3–20)	38%	33%	38%	17%	17%	67%
Solomon Islands										
Experts	2	0	16 (2–30)	3.0 (1–5)	–	–	0%	50%	50%	0%
Government	3	1	10.5 (5–17)	2.8 (0.5–5)	100%	0%	75%	0%	25%	75%
INGO	3	4	10.1 (1–20)	3.5 (2.5–4)	100%	0%	50%	0%	16%	84%
Vanuatu										
Experts	2	1	9.0 (9)	14.0 (14)	–	–	0%	0%	50%	50%
Government	2	3	3.9 (2–8)	8.0 (0–21)	20%	0%	20%	20%	0%	80%
LNGO	2	1	11.7 (0–30)	21.3 (2–58)	50%	0%	33%	0%	33%	67%
INGO	1	1	1.0 (0–2)	7.0 (7)	0%	0%	50%	0%	50%	50%
Regional organizations	3	8	14.1 (3.5–35)	8.3 (2–23)	82%	63%	27%	0%	36%	64%
Global agencies	4	1	8.9 (0–15.5)	4.0 (1–10)	80%	50%	80%	20%	20%	60%

W = women, M = men. LNGO = local non-government organization, INGO = international non-government organization. Gender rankings were 'Very Poor' or 'Poor' (P), 'Neither Good or Poor' (G/P), 'Good' or 'Very Good' (G).

purposive (via consultations with experts) and snowball sampling during interviews to get a wide diversity of respondents. Due to the higher number of global and regional organizations with headquarters in Fiji's capital Suva, we conducted more interviews in Fiji (n = 32) compared to Solomon Islands (n = 13) and Vanuatu (n = 15). Eight informants were based in New Caledonia (n = 5), Samoa (n = 1), Hawaii (n = 1) and Australia (n = 1) but their SSF work was primarily focused in Melanesia.

All interviews were confidential and conducted face-to-face (n = 66) or over Skype (n = 2) between August 2018 to February 2019 and lasted between 45 and 60 min. Interviews were voluntary and only proceeded if written consent was obtained. We conducted 40 interviews with both researchers present, recorded independently in writing, and jointly scribed in Microsoft Excel. The remaining 28 interviews were conducted with one researcher present. This approach reduced biases in interpretation, and allowed for cross-checking and validation of responses by two independent researchers where possible. One researcher had lived and worked in Solomon Islands, and the other was from Fiji and had worked in all three countries – therefore the use of terms, particularly in local languages were familiar, and cultural or context nuances understood.

2.3. Data coding and analysis

We asked respondents to describe the specific approaches used by their organizations to include gender within SSF management and development projects and programs. To assess the extent these approaches aligned with gender best practice, we applied a framework designed for community-based agricultural projects in order to determine whether gender inclusion approaches were likely to 'reach', 'benefit', or 'empower' women's lives (adapted from Fig. 1 in [36]). We selected this framework because it reflects current thinking on gender inclusion, and its successful application of projects, programs and within organizations in the agricultural sector. 'Reach' approaches are defined as those that explicitly focus on women's participation in activities or projects (e.g. attendance at meetings, workshops or trainings). 'Benefit' approaches provide specific benefits to women (e.g. access to resources) to increase their wellbeing such as improved food security or income generation. 'Empower' approaches aim to increase or strengthen the ability of women to make their own strategic life choices (e.g. related to the use of income), and to exercise those choices. We added a fourth category to capture transformational approaches increasingly being used by organizations in the fisheries and aquaculture sector (Figs. 1 and 2 in [37]). 'Transform' approaches aim to challenge underlying gender norms (both visible and invisible), structures and power dynamics that create and reinforce inequalities. It is important to note that these approaches are not linear or sequential – instead they should be viewed as approaches which in combination play an important role in the inclusion and integration of gender into practice.

We employed an interactive grounded theory approach to analyze the qualitative descriptions of the gender approaches and barriers in two stages (consistent with [38]). In the first stage the data were analyzed to decipher core meaning (i.e., short phrases capturing the essence of that respondents shared) in an Excel database. In the second stage, responses were grouped into categories according to themes that emerged from the data. To enable both a qualitative and quantitative analysis and presentation of the data, for each category a '1' or a '0' was given to indicate if a respondent listed a particular approach or barrier, or not. The number of respondents were tallied up for each category and then a third review was done to look at consolidating a smaller group of categories to better visualise the data.

To assess one aspect of organizational capacity we asked respondents if they had a gender focal point (GFP) within their organization, and if so, to provide a name and contact. For the purpose of this study a GFP is the key staff member appointed to deal with the gender mainstreaming strategy of the organization, including the training or building of staff capacity to incorporate gender into their work, in terms of content and processes. To determine the level of expertise for each GFP listed, we assessed their years of experience, formal education and qualifications and cross-validated during interviews and using secondary sources including professional networks and phone calls with gender experts.

3. Results

3.1. Gender inclusion approaches

Respondents' descriptions of gender inclusive approaches in SSF management and development fell into three broad but distinct categories: (a) those used in projects and programs targeted at coastal communities (Table 2); (b) national level research and policy (Table 3); and (c) approaches used internally within organizations (e.g. internal

Table 2
Approaches used to include gender into small-scale fisheries management and development, categorized according to four types of outcomes: Reach (R), Benefit (B), Empower (E), Transform (T) (modified from [26–37]).

Broad categories of approaches	n	Code	Specific approaches
Community consultation practice	8	R1	Using participatory community resource management processes (e.g. resource mapping) that try to be as inclusive as possible during planning phases.
	10	R2	Using a community-based adaptive management approach that specifically integrates the viewpoints, perspectives and recommendations of all members of the community, including women, into the final plan.
	28	R3	Efforts to increase the number of women at community meetings or workshops. This includes working through traditional male hierarchies to get the support of leaders to allow more women to participate, or paying special attention to times when women are available.
	20	R4	Making a targetted effort to get the inputs and/or perspectives of women in community workshops.
	16	R5	Holding separate focal group discussions with women to enable them to speak more freely.
	10	R6	Using female facilitators for workshops, especially for facilitating separate focal group discussions.
Female leadership	6	R7	Investing in women leaders and champions to lead efforts to increase engagement of women, and/or to serve as a focal point for capturing women's perspectives.
	2	R8	Using women as community focal points for projects.
Training	15	R9	Providing specific training opportunities targeted at women.
Presence on committees	14	R10	Increasing women's numerical representation on committees (e.g. resource management) and associations (e.g. fishers, seafood vendors).
	3	R11	Creating or strengthening women's committees to address livelihoods, fisheries or broader natural resource management issues.
Gender assessments	18	R12	Undertaking site-level gender assessments, socioeconomic surveys of women in the fisheries sector, and includes working with women to collect fisheries data.
Learning networks	3	R13	Supporting cross-learning between women through site exchange visits, or the hosting of national or subnational forums for women.
Tradition and cultures	2	R14	Fostering or using traditional approaches that are more inclusive of women, or provide a mechanism for women to input into decision-making.
Women's projects	19	R15, B1	Developing livelihood projects specifically targeted at women to ensure there are clear benefits to them. These projects focus on upgrading skills or access to markets, or providing alternatives to reduce fishing pressure.
	8	R16, B2	Developing projects that target fisheries that women dominate in, or are traditionally seen as 'women's fisheries'.
Funding	8	B3	Creating mechanisms for women to access funds for livelihoods (fishing, non-fishing) through granting or loan mechanisms.
Shared decision-making	2	E1	Fostering partnerships between men and women, especially around collective or shared decision-making, where women's perspectives shape outcomes.
	2	T1	Developing programs that specifically aim to change the attitudes and behavior of men towards women, within social and cultural contexts.

Some approaches have been categorized under two gender outcomes based on the description provided by respondents. n = number of respondents who listed an approach.

gender policy, gender-sensitive recruitment policies) (Table 3).

While the diversity of approaches listed may reflect, in part, our sampling effort (e.g. in Fiji 13 respondents were from NGOs and six from government, Table 1), respondents were not restricted in the number of approaches they described. Overall, respondents described 21 different approaches that were used to implement SSF projects and programs in coastal communities in the three countries (Fig. 1, Table 2). Based on the descriptions, we classified each according to four types of gender approaches (**R**each, **B**enefit, **E**mpower or **T**ransform), and then aggregated these approaches into 11 broader categories: (1) community consultation practice (R1–R6); (2) female leadership (R7–R8); (3) training (R9); (4) presence on committees (R10–R11); (5) gender assessments (R12); (6) learning networks (R13); (7) tradition and culture (R14); (8) women's projects (R15–R16, B1–B2); (9) funding (B3); (10) shared decision-making (E1); and (11) gender norm transformation (T1) (Table 2). We classified the design and implementation of projects and programs that targeted technical support to women, or that targeted fisheries dominated by women as both 'reach' and 'benefit' as it was difficult to definitively assess from the approach description, and likely bridged both approach types.

Overall, we found 16 different approaches described to reach women, three to benefit women, one to empower women, and one to transform gender norms (Table 2). Numerically, reach approaches were listed more frequently by respondents (n = 135, 68%), followed by benefit (n = 55, 28%), empower (n = 6, 3%) and transform (n = 2, 1%). There was a large skew towards community consultation practice, particularly efforts to increase the number of women at community meetings and workshops, to get the viewpoints or perspectives of women, or to hold separate focal group discussions to enable women to speak more freely (Table 2). Only two respondents described 'empower' approaches used to foster working partnerships between men and women to encourage decisions to be made jointly or collectively (Table 2). 'Transform' approaches to change the attitudes and behaviors of men were described by two respondents in Fiji (Table 2). One specifically worked to change male attitudes toward women, for instance, promoting men to recognize the significance of women's roles as natural resource stewards and become champions for inclusion of women in natural resource decisions at the community level, and the other sought to work with men to address gender-based violence in the Fijian capital Suva. There was a greater diversity of approaches used in Fiji across the reach, benefit, empower and transform spectrum, compared to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and especially by NGOs (Fig. 1). Solomon Islands government staff who reported a strong focus community-based management and fisheries development only described approaches that reach women. Similarly, only reach approaches were used by the four regional organizations interviewed in their provision of support to the governments in the three countries.

At a national level, approaches focused on the gathering of sex-disaggregated data, gender audits, delivering training or developing toolkits or guides for other organizations, inclusion of gender into regional frameworks, national legislation or policies, or political advocacy (Table 3). The majority of these approaches were described by regional or global organizations working closely with Pacific Island governments. We found little to no evidence to suggest that any of those

Table 3
Approaches used in Melanesia to integrate gender within their own organizations (internal), or into national level research and policy.

Focus	n	Approaches	Government	NGO	Regional	Global
Internal	9	Incorporating gender into projects or programs during the design phase, or into organizational work plan to ensure there are specific activities and outcomes targeted at women.	x	x	x	x
	6	Using monitoring and evaluation frameworks and indicators to measure progress towards gender inclusion.		x	x	x
	6	Ensuring a gender policy or strategy is in place to guide the organization in the implementation of programs (e.g. gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation).	x	x	x	x
	5	Adopting recruitment processes that promote equal opportunity for women and men.	x	x	x	
	5	Adopting recruitment processes that support the increased hiring of women (for better gender balance), including for senior leadership positions.		x	x	
	4	Providing gender training for organizational staff to enable them to better incorporate into their work.		x	x	
	3	Working with gender experts to fill capacity gaps within own department or organization.		x	x	x
	2	Appointing a gender focal point for guiding the gender work of the organization.	x	x		
National	4	Developing gender toolkits and guides for managers and practitioners.		x	x	x
	3	Integrating gender into regional frameworks, national legislation and policies.	x		x	x
	3	Collecting sex-disaggregated data at a national level on small-scale fisheries.	x	x		x
	2	Providing gender training for partners and other practitioners.			x	x
	1	Political advocacy for gender equality and inclusion.			x	
	1	Undertaking national level gender assessments and audits to identify gaps and inform future strategies.		x		

n = number of respondents who listed an approach.

working with SSF sector (including NGOs) were guided by global or regional gender commitments and guidelines, including the SSF Guidelines or SSF Gender Handbook.

Eight internal organizational approaches were described by 40 respondents. These included organizational specific gender policies and/or strategies, use of monitoring and evaluation frameworks and indicators to measure progress towards gender equality, applying recruitment processes that promote equal opportunity or support the hiring of women in senior positions, appointment of internal GFPs, and internal trainings for staff on gender. Respondents that largely described internal organizational gender approaches were regional and global organizations which had a mandate to provide technical support to governments, rather than implement community-based projects. However, some respondents noted that while gender equality policies existed on paper, they were not always applied in practice. For example, a female respondent from a global agency stated that despite having gender polices in place, "until they [high level male managers] leave [the organization] nothing will change. Women are there [within the organization] in principle to meet numbers [gender quotas]. It's hard to institute any changes. Women at the senior level are left out of decision-making".

Towards the end of the interview, after reflecting on the approaches used, we asked respondents to rate their organization's capacity to include gender in their programs or policies along a five-point Likert scale (i.e. Very Poor, Poor, Neither Good or Poor, Good, Very Good), and provide a justification or explanation for their ranking. Despite gender inclusion approaches trending toward the 'reach' end of the spectrum, the majority of respondents (62.7%) perceived their organization's capacity for gender inclusion as 'Good' or 'Very Good' (Table 1). With the exception of experts in Solomon Islands, less than 20% of respondents gave themselves a 'Poor' or 'Very Poor' ranking. Justifications for high ranking included:

"All the women staff can inform their own work plans." (female respondent, Government, Solomon Islands).

"Compared to 10 years ago we've improved a lot." (male respondent, Government, Vanuatu).

Respondents that provided a low ranking explained:

"No expertise. No demand. No drive for gender. No consequences if [gender] not included. Not in people's KPIs [key performance indicators]." (male respondent, Government, Fiji).

"Policy and [on] paper is a 5 [Very Good], and implementation is a 2 [Poor]." (female respondent, global agency).

3.2. Gender barriers

We asked respondents to list up to three main barriers their organization faced when it came to the inclusion of gender in SSF projects and programs. We then identified 28 barriers and aggregated these into eight distinct categories (listed from highest to lowest ranking, based on the frequency of responses): (1) gender capacity (i.e., of individuals, of organizations, and access to capacity externally); (2) institutional culture, including individual values and biases; (3) inadequate human or financial resources; (4) poor gender institutionalization; (5) culture and traditions; (6) gender norms at the community level; (7) insufficient data or evidence; and (8) incoherence of gender in legislation and policy (Table 4). The ranking of barriers at the country level, or within organizational types is shown in Table 5. We describe the top three barriers in detail, and summarize the remaining five.

Capacity for gender inclusion was reported as the largest barrier overall (85.3% of respondents) (Table 4), and by those interviewed in Fiji and Solomon Islands (Table 5). Gender capacity was expressed at both individual and organizational levels, and in terms of access to gender expertise externally. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.7%) reported they had no opportunities to build their gender capacity over the past 12 months. For those that had training opportunities, two thirds were women and one third were men. Government staff in Solomon Islands had greater opportunity with 75% reporting receiving gender training in last 12 months, compared to government staff in Fiji (0%) and Vanuatu (20%) (Table 1). Gender training was largely offered to one or two individuals rather than a wider group of staff within their organization. Global organizations had the greatest opportunity for gender training (80% respondents), but regional organizations, including those mandated by Pacific Island governments had fewer opportunities than expected (27% respondents).

Almost half (49.2%) of the respondents stated their organizations

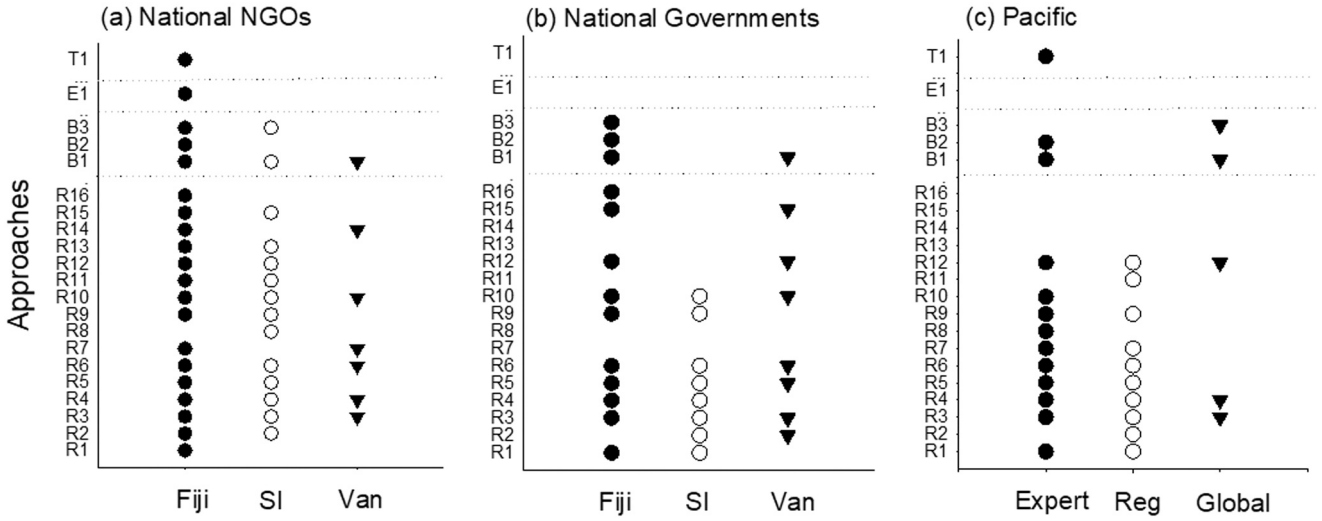

Fig. 1. Diversity of gender approaches used in small-scale fisheries projects and programs by (a) nationally-based NGOs, (b) government, and (c) experts and organizations with a Pacific focus, including Melanesia. Descriptions of codes (i.e. R1–R16, B1–B3, E1, T1) are provided in Table 2.
Approaches are classified into four types: Reach (R), Benefit (B), Empower (E), Transform (T) (modified from [36,37].

had GFPs, though this varied between countries (39.3% in Fiji, 83.3% in Solomon Islands, 26.7% in Vanuatu). Regional and global organizations had the greatest access to qualified gender expertise. Some international NGOs had access to at least one appointed gender expert within their regional or global office, but not all staff were aware this expertise was available and were not provided with any gender-specific support. In some cases, organizational gender responsibilities were viewed as the sole responsibility of one person, the GFP. Many government respondents expressed personal opinions or highlighted an institutional attitude that gender issues were the role and responsibility of the Ministry of Women. However, our analysis of the qualifications and the experience of GFPs revealed almost all did not have formal qualifications, training or sufficient gender-related experience (Table 1). One respondent explained "people working on fisheries keep referring to me as a gender expert in Fiji, but I am not. I have not undertaken any studies or received any training in gender. My staff and I are still learning how to include gender in both our fisheries and conservation work. I know our approaches are not transforming women's lives." (female respondent, NGO, Fiji).

Respondents reported that staff brought into the workplace their own values, beliefs, biases and prejudices on the importance of gender inclusion, or why gender equality matters in the fisheries sector. Examples of institutional culture and the lack of investment in human or financial resources, were reported as the second highest barriers to gender inclusion (55.9% of respondents each, Table 4). Institutional culture as a barrier was ranked high by those in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and by government and regional organizations with respondents citing strong beliefs about gender roles (Table 5). For example, some female respondents reported that administration and data entry was generally considered "women's work" while enforcement and SCUBA diving was "men's work". One woman in government complained that men used safety, physical strength or menstrual cycles as reasons why women were not suited to SCUBA diving. Women's abilities to attain senior leadership positions were reported as particularly challenging within government institutions which are male-dominated across the three countries. Interestingly, some women found it was older women with more traditional views on women's roles in community and society that were 'bullying' or creating barriers to women's leadership in their respective countries. Respondents working in Fiji and NGOs were the only groups that did not rank institutional culture highly as a barrier (Table 5).

Inadequate human or financial resources was ranked high by respondents in Fiji and Vanuatu, and those working for government or NGOs (Table 5). Specifically, respondents referenced insufficient staff or funding as restricting their ability to adequately include gender into their work. This was highlighted by respondents working in NGOs who lamented that much of the gender-related funding in the Pacific is geared towards addressing domestic violence issues and was not accessible to their fisheries programs or organizations.

More than half of respondents (52.9%) reported gender was poorly institutionalized within their organizations. Specifically, respondents referred to the lack of processes in place to mainstream gender (particularly within fisheries ministries), inadequate gender specific budget allocation, lack of women in leadership positions, and the responsibility for gender inclusion rested with a few unqualified and junior individuals (Table 4). Respondents working in fisheries ministries reported that their superiors and colleagues saw gender as the work of the Ministry of Women. Many stated culture and traditions (38.2% of respondents) and/or gender norms (32.4% of respondents) within communities were strong barriers to discussing and addressing gender equity in SSF management and development. As one woman explained "traditional barriers meant we can't push it [gender] too much. We need to weave it in slowly. You need support from men and chiefs, so we need to do it subtly. A careful approach [is needed], otherwise, it could cause men to beat their wives" (NGO, Fiji).

Some respondents (19.1%) highlighted that there was insufficient data and evidence to make a strong case for gender inclusion in their work and that donors needed to hold government to account on gender and other forms of social inclusion. Lastly, 5.9% of respondents highlighted the incoherence or absence of reference to gender in legislation and policies when it comes to gender inclusion.

4. Discussion

With increasing efforts to meaningfully and appropriately address gender inequalities within SSF, there is a need to evaluate the ways in which organizations approach gender. Projects and programs designed to manage and/or develop SSFs are strongly influenced by the norms and value systems held by decision-makers, NGOs, and development agencies [39–41]. Consequently, the approaches and tools used by organizations can have a profound influence and impact on outcomes, including gender equality in the SSF sector. Our analysis finds that SSF organizations operating in Melanesia approach gender inclusion in diverse ways. Although well-intentioned, these approaches are

Table 4
Barriers to gender inclusion in small-scale fisheries management and development in Melanesia (n = number of respondents).

Barrier type	Description of barriers	Examples
Gender capacity (n = 58)	Lack of a gender specialist, gender focal point or internal capacity to guide and inform the work, with challenges in recruiting individuals with both fisheries and gender experience.	"Note enough staff for what we want to do. We need a gender focal point for our office working on this full time, not just me trying to fit this into my role." – INGO, Solomon Islands
	Little to no access to training on gender equality and social inclusion and its application in fisheries management and development.	"We don't really understand what gender is. Particularly the technical side of this so that we can apply to our work with communities and [have it] guide us." – Government, Solomon Islands
	Few or no tools available for integrating gender into fisheries, that can be applied to a diversity of cultural and social contexts at national and/or subnational level.	
	Knowledge of 'gender' and 'gender inclusion' and its relevance to the fisheries sector, including mechanisms to share knowledge and lessons learned.	"The language around gender. We talk about it but we don't know what it looks like. There is a perception it's all about women." – International Organization, Vanuatu
	Incorrect assumptions that gender is 'foreign' (i.e. Western concepts) and therefore local staff within organizations or communities are resistant.	
	Little to no understanding of global or regional commitments on gender equality, and relevance to the fisheries sector, particularly for work at the community level.	
Institutional culture, including individual values and biases (n = 38)	Political will and senior leadership's attitude or approach to gender equality and inclusion in the fisheries sector.	"[Our staff are] not used to receiving instructions from female staff. It's an adjustment." – Government, Vanuatu
	Organizations are made up of national staff with their own values, biases and prejudices, making it challenging to introduce new ideas such as gender equality into the workplace. This also includes challenges of introducing new ideas (e.g. gender) to projects or programs, as managers and staff prefer to do things the 'old way'.	"There is a lot of lip-service by senior executives." – Regional Organization
	Ministry of Fisheries staff seeing 'gender' as the role and responsibility of the Ministry of Women, and therefore not a part of their mandate. Others seeing it the role and responsibility of gender organizations.	"Old guard who sees gender issues as being PC [politically correct] and see gender as something to tick off to get donors off their back." – Regional Organization
	Gender stereotypes within organizations on what is suitable 'women's work' (e.g. administration, data entry) versus 'men's work' (e.g. enforcement, SCUBA diving).	"It is hard to institute any changes [within own organization]. Women at the senior level are left out of decision-making." – International Organization
	Woman in senior leadership positions are still outnumbered by men in similar positions, and may not be equally valued or be able to speak freely.	
	Barriers women create for other women moving or being promoted into leadership positions.	
	Skewing of technical and financial resources towards supporting men in local communities.	
Inadequate human or financial resources (n = 38)	Insufficient women within organization who can lead work and engage with women in the community.	"External donors need to come in and help with our women." – Government, Fiji
	No funding or inadequate funding for adding on 'gender work' into projects or programs. This included funds to hire staff, as well as pay for field work.	"The Ministry has great ideas but not enough money or people to do more of this work. Need to have a consistent presence to make a difference." – Government, Vanuatu
Poor gender institutionalization (n = 36)	The responsibility of gender inclusion resting with a select few who are ineffective because they do not have institutional level decision-making power, and are largely unqualified for the role. In the case of government staff, the role of 'gender focal point' is added onto a staff member's existing job description.	"Gender keeps slipping through the cracks." – Government, Vanuatu
	Gender equality outcomes are specified in policies and are reflected in annual plans, but without a budget allocated for implementation.	"We need gender focal points full time. It's hard for me to work on gender … I would spend ninety percent of my time on the research component of my work, and ten percent on [my] gender focal point role. We need a full-time [gender] post." – Government, Fiji
	Lack of women in organization, especially in leadership positions.	
	Competing priorities result in gender being given a low priority for implementation or receiving funds.	
	Poor or unclear processes for gender mainstreaming within government ministries.	

(*continued on next page*)

Table 4 (*continued*)

Barrier type	Description of barriers	Examples
Culture and traditions (n = 26)	Cultural and traditional barriers are rules and social constructs governing at the community level that are largely hierarchical in nature. Based on their traditional roles, men dominate on decision-making on fisheries and natural resources more broadly.	"Traditional barriers mean we can't push it [gender] too much. We need to weave it in slowly; you need support from men and chiefs so we need to do it subtly." – INGO, Fiji "Equality of men and women is not one of the talking things in [our] culture." – LNGO, Vanuatu "There are cultural barriers at all levels. Even if we have a training/meeting with females they will just sit there, the men will talk." – International Organization, Solomon Islands
Gender norms at the community level (n = 22)	Strong stereotypes about gender roles and responsibilities, making it challenging to introduce new ideas such as gender equality into community settings. Barriers women create for themselves or for other women (e.g. young girls) within the community. Barriers men create for women within the community, including dictating where and when women should speak.	"How do you work with women without offending men?" – LNGO, Fiji "Even if we have a training/meeting with females they will just sit there, the men will talk." – International Organization, Solomon Islands
Insufficient data or evidence of change (n = 13)	Lack of sex-disaggregated data on small-scale fisheries for management and measuring impact and change. Donors not holding government accountable on gender or other forms of social inclusion. The use of number of women as a metric.	"Donor requirements are difficult. They want to know the number of women and girls included. They suggested we go back and do an internal review of our projects." – INGO, Fiji "Women are there in principle to meet numbers" [referring to women in leadership positions in respondent's organization]." – International Organization, Pacific
Incoherence of gender in legislation and policy (n = 4)	National legislation and policy and do not adequately address gender, if at all.	"Old fisheries policies and legislation makes it challenging [to include gender in fisheries]." – Government, Fiji

The descriptions of barriers are based on a synthesis of responses by those interviewed, and are grouped together according to eight thematic areas.

restricted by various barriers which mean that current efforts may not be fit to adequately address inequalities in SSF.

4.1. Gender approaches

The majority of approaches used by SSF organizations in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were targeted toward women, and rarely considered men or gender relations. Gender inclusion approaches were designed to reach women, few benefited them, and almost none empowered women or used a transformative approach to address the root causes of gender inequality in the sector. For example, 'reach' approaches featured strongly in community consultation practice, where increasing the number of women at meetings was a key strategy used and indicator of success. However, inviting more women does not necessary result in equal participation, especially if cultural norms or different communication styles prevent women from speaking out, or being in the same room as certain male members of their family [42,43]. Of greater concern is that an overly narrow focus on attendance could lead to women being treated as objects, where their presence at workshops is "to secure compliance, minimize dissent, [and] lend legitimacy" to projects [42].

Similarly, ensuring increasing representation of women on a management committee is necessary, but insufficient on its own for having their voices and concerns heard, without also addressing the underlying social and cultural norms that limit or prevent their participation in decision-making around fisheries in the first place [42,44]. Selection of women to management committees may favor more elite women and carry the assumption that they will, and are able to, represent all women and tackle gender issues; such processes may widen inequitable gender relations between women, and promote further exclusion of marginalized women [45]. These are pertinent issues in Melanesian communities where patriarchal norms (i.e. that promote men as dominant decision-making authorities), increase the likelihood of women, youth and other marginalized groups being overlooked, in community consultations or in the provision of resources such as funding, training, and livelihood opportunities [12,13,44,46].

The predominate focus on women through reach approaches could partly relate to fisheries managers and practitioners equating gender with women, and overlooking men and gender relations. The conflation of gender with women in fisheries has been found to be systemic in global, regional and national policy instruments being used in the Pacific [47], and in development practice more broadly [42,48]. Furthermore, managers and practitioners mistakenly position women as inherently vulnerable and inferior to men, rather than contextualized in gendered environments (e.g. household, community, society) where their vulnerability is an outcome of oppressive and exploitative norms, power relations, structures and processes [49,50]. The exclusion of men in the conceptualization of gender and subsequent approaches does not recognize men as part of the problem, or provide them the opportunity to be part of the solution; consequently, they can in fact become 'blockers' of much needed change [51,52].

The focus on reach approaches likely stems from managers and practitioners' (and their organizations') hesitancy and concerns that if they advocate for gender equality too strongly, quickly or incorrectly within coastal communities, they may do more harm (e.g. increase gender-based violence, further reduce women's rights) or be asked to leave. Unfortunately, this type of 'zero sum game' thinking where one person's gain (women) would be another's loss (men) [53] is a false assumption that hinders advances toward gender equality. Whilst being aware of implications for both women and men is critical, more recent approaches seek to promote gender transformative change (i.e., those that seek to challenge unequal and harmful structures and norms that underpin gender inequalities), that account for these sensitivities (e.g., [54]). There are groups that provide guidance and training on how to work with men and boys to address harmful gender norms and promote gender transformative change (e.g. [55]). Although

Table 5
Ranking of barriers to gender inclusion in small-scale fisheries management and development for Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, overall for the study, and identified by different organizations and experts at national, regional and global level.

Barriers	Overall	Fiji	Solomon Is.	Vanuatu	Government	NGOs	Regional	Global	Experts
Gender capacity	1	1	1	3	3	1	1	2	1
Institutional culture	2	6	2	2	2	5	2	1	3
Inadequate resources	2	2	4	1	1	2	5	–	3
Gender is not institutionalized	3	5	3	4	5	5	3	3	2
Cultural barriers	4	3	6	2	4	3	4	5	5
Gender roles and norms	5	4	5	5	6	4	6	5	4
Evidence of change	6	6	7	6	7	6	7	4	4
Existing legislation and policies	–	7	8	–	7	7	–	–	6

Numbers represent rankings with "1" being the most commonly ranked and "8" the least commonly ranked. "–" means it was not mentioned. The three highest ranking barriers are highlighted. Detailed descriptions of barriers are provided in Table 4.

gender-transformative change in itself remains largely aspirational in the context of SSF, there are increasing examples in the aquaculture and agriculture sectors to draw on (e.g., [54,56,57]). For example, gender transformative approaches are being applied in Bangladesh and Zambia to address inequalities in aquatic agricultural systems [56].

4.2. Gender barriers and opportunities

Our study identified two important areas for investment to improve gender inclusion in the SSF sector and further progress gender equitable outcomes – capacity and institutional culture. First, lack of capacity to include gender within individual organizations and SSF sector more broadly, stemmed from most respondents: (1) receiving little to no training (including at senior level); (2) having poor access to gender experts; and (3) lacking practical tools to guide them. Despite low capacity (as evidenced by the predominant 'reach' approaches they used), the majority of fisheries managers and practitioners ranked their internal organizational capacity for gender inclusion as high. This is problematic as it reinforced approaches that are at best, tokenistic [47], and at worst may be reinforcing or widening inequalities in the SSF sector, particularly for women. Our findings suggest that the bar for including gender in SSF management and development is currently set very low, with an ambiguous benchmark for what is acceptable practice, and further emphasizes the need to build capacity of fisheries managers and practitioners in gender-inclusive best practices.

The plethora and diversity of organizations in Melanesia and the wider Pacific with a long history of working on gender, provides a unique opportunity to build networks and partnerships to build capacity for gender inclusion in practice in the SSF sector. Managers and practitioners in the Pacific have access to global agencies (e.g. UN Women), regional organizations (e.g. SPC) and international development organizations (e.g. Oxfam, Care International) with decades of gender and development expertise, as well as Pacific context-specific tools and materials that can be applied to the SSF sector [e.g. 26]. Each country has a ministry mandated to oversee the implementation of national gender equality policies, and to support and promote the mainstreaming of gender into all sectors, including fisheries. Stronger collaborations and cross-sectoral learning with gender development organizations is perhaps one of the greatest untapped opportunities to build gender capacity in fisheries managers and practitioners, and benefit from decades of knowledge gained and lessons learned [58].

Second, within organizations, gender inclusion was limited by institutional culture including individual values and biases. This manifests in a number of ways including the type of work assigned to female versus male staff, the predominant selection of women for gender training, and inherent male biases in appointments into senior leadership positions. This is consistent with other research that has shown institutions are gendered with gender norms, beliefs and practices woven into the political fabric of organizational environments, further reinforced by organizational actors embedded within them [31,59]. In many cases, gender inequalities are upheld by institutional culture [31,60]. Despite the investments by regional and global organizations to assist national governments with gender audits and assessments (e.g. [23–25]) and national policies in place to address gender inequality [61–63], gender was only weakly institutionalized within government and was recognized across organizations (especially by regional and global organizations) as a major barrier. For example, government GFPs tended to be fairly junior female staff without formal training, with little power and ability to influence ministry- or department-level gender inclusion within their projects and programs. The duties as GFPs were in addition to their normal tasks and responsibilities, and were largely tokenistic – for example, to gather gender data to share with the Ministry of Women when requested (S.M., pers. comm.). The challenges of GFPs in navigating their roles and garnering the support of their peers is not unique to fisheries, and is also a challenge in development organizations [65]. For example, similar challenges have been reported in Uganda and Rwanda, where the majority of GFPs within two large national agricultural research institutions were voluntary, comprised of lower level staff with no terms of reference, no resources, and over sixty percent without technical capacity for gender inclusion [64].

Gender inclusion in SSF management and development requires a systematic change to existing institutions and institutional practices, which go beyond recruiting more women, toolkits and checklist approaches. The inclusion of gender in fisheries is hindered by the fact that these are addressed often by separate ministries, and are poorly included, integrated or mainstreamed into the SSF sector. A review of gender strategies found over two thirds of gender policy instruments in the Pacific focused on organizational human resourcing and project assessments, rather than initiatives or projects being implemented with communities reliant on fisheries [47]. Although research is still lagging, reforming the normative structure and processes of institutions is thought to be fundamental to reducing gender inequalities [31]. Gender norms are not fixed, but fluid, and often need to go through a process of negotiation and interpretation by different actors in their own unique social-cultural contexts [59,66,67]. This may mean taking steps to remove outdated practices and legitimize new ones [68], while challenging "institutional defenders who benefit from the organizations status quo" [69]. This requires organizations to adopt transformative approaches and monitoring and evaluation systems that critically examine gender attitudes, beliefs, practices and power dynamics among staff and with partners [67,69]. Rather than gender equality being seen as a global principle enforced in a top-down manner [59], spaces need to be created for organizations and individuals to contest and negotiate what gender means in SSF practice, identify gender advocates and resistors, and redefine organizational motivations, missions and values [65].

5. Conclusion

The approaches used by organizations working in SSF emphasize that the sector is very much in its infancy when it comes to addressing gender equality. There is conceptual confusion with 'gender' being conflated to 'helping women'. Future efforts need to work on addressing

the capacity gaps that perpetuate this misconception (e.g. the development of guidelines, tools and training programs), but also to provide a benchmark for what is acceptable practice for fisheries managers and practitioners in Melanesia. However, such efforts will be futile if there is not explicit commitment toward gender equality. Gender inclusion in SSF management and development is unlikely to be achieved without an explicit political and institutional commitment (especially at senior levels), strategy and systematic efforts to implement meaningful gender approaches with effective accountability mechanisms in place. Government agencies and their partners need to develop innovative ways of promoting, facilitating and rewarding efforts to include gender perspectives into fisheries management and development. Such a step can assist the transition from gender inclusive approaches being 'new' to the 'norm'. Through adopting lessons from gender and development theory and practice, fisheries managers and practitioners need to diversify their approaches to address the underlying norms, relations, structures that shape the marginalization of women. This means arming fisheries managers and practitioners with tools that go beyond simply reaching women, to empowering women, and transforming gender norms and relationships that reinforce inequalities, in locally and culturally acceptable ways.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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