

The Republic of Vanuatu

Ni-Vanuatu women play vital but underrecognized roles across fisheries value chains, contributing to food security, local economies, and community well-being. Across the archipelago, women engage in a wide range of fishing practices shaped by local geographies and customs – from reef gleaning and diving for octopus, to trap-setting, handlining, and dropline fishing. Women are also central to post-harvest processing and market trade, with their earnings often reinvested in household needs, such as food, education, and health, amplifying their societal impact.

Narrow definitions of "fishing", however, often exclude women from fisheries data, decision-making, and resource access. Gender roles shaped by Kastom (customary) practices, religious norms, and colonial legacies intersect to often constrain women's rights – particularly in rural areas. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious concern, with prevalence rates among the highest recorded globally.

Despite these challenges, meaningful change is underway. The *National Gender Equality Policy (2020-2030)* and gender quotas in municipal councils are expanding women's participation in governance. Initiatives such as the Vanua Tai Resource Monitoring Network – which empowers women's participation in natural resource management – and market vendor associations promote women's voices and leadership. Additionally, activities by Wan Smolbag, the Male Advocates Programme, and the "Rod Blong Jenis" campaign are engaging men as allies to prevent GBV and help challenge harmful norms.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of seafood value chains in Vanuatu, with a focus on gender dimensions, highlighting opportunities to strengthen gender equity and women's empowerment in the sector and beyond. It is part of a series offering development partners, government agencies, civil society groups, donors, and researchers with a snapshot of gender equity and fisheries to inform the planning and delivery of relevant activities these actors might be involved in or are in the process of developing.



February, 2026

Fish production

National data

Efforts to estimate coastal and inland fisheries production in Vanuatu are constrained by limited data and reporting systems. Nonetheless, for 2021, coastal commercial fisheries production^a was estimated at 1,300 tonnes, worth VT 780 million,^{b,c} while coastal subsistence fisheries accounted for an estimated 3,100 tonnes, worth VT 1,085 million.¹ For the same year, industrial tuna and bycatch landings from locally-based vessels operating within the Vanuatu Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) were estimated at 1,000 tonnes, worth VT 256 million, while foreign-based fleets caught an estimated 2,320 tonnes, worth VT 1,009 million.¹ Much of this catch is not landed in Vanuatu, despite the presence of a processing facility in Port Vila. In 2022, the total annual tuna catch in Vanuatu's waters – across all species, fishing methods, and fleets – was estimated at 6,239 tonnes.^{d,2}

Freshwater fisheries contribute an estimated 88 tonnes per year, valued at VT 33.3 million.¹ These fisheries comprise a range of local and introduced species, including *Macrobrachium spp.* (freshwater prawns), clams, and finfish such as flagtails, grunters, mullet, carp, tilapia, and eels.¹

Aquaculture production remains limited. Main commodities include *Macrobrachium spp.* and marine shrimp. Several other aquaculture activities, such as juvenile giant clam production for the aquarium trade and sea ranching, as well as tilapia farming, have become inactive in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.³ In 2020, aquaculture production was estimated at 2,902 kg from semi-commercial and commercial-sized ponds, one of the lowest on record.³ This reflects both limited data collection and a shift in focus toward local food security needs in response to COVID-19 and category-5 Tropical Cyclone Harold (April 2020).³

Sea Around Us data

The Sea Around Us estimated total annual marine capture production for Vanuatu's fleets as follows:^{e,5}

- ✓ Marine subsistence^f (2019) – 3,642 tonnes
- ✓ Marine commercial^g (2019) – 69,105 tonnes by the industrial sector, with 29,353 tonnes caught on the high seas and 39,752 tonnes in EEZs. Catches within EEZs mostly came from foreign waters (e.g., Kiribati: 34%, Papua New Guinea: 15%, Federated States of Micronesia: 9%, Falkland Islands and Tuvalu: 7% each, and Cook Islands: 6%) and only 2%, equivalent to 959 tonnes, were captured within Vanuatu's EEZ. Local artisanal fleets were responsible for capturing 1,454 tonnes within Vanuatu's waters.

Foreign industrial fleets accounted for an additional catch of 13,478 tonnes (2019) within Vanuatu's EEZ. China and Fiji were responsible for 20% and 8% of that catch, respectively.

Fish consumption

Apparent fish consumption^h was estimated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations at 29.5kg per capita per year (2022).⁷

Based on regional data and the assumption that 60% of a whole fish is edible, an alternative estimate puts consumption at an estimated 34.8kg per capita per year.⁸

Data from the 2019 National Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) found that 88% of households consumed aquatic foods, with an average per capita intake of 25.7kg. Consumption was composed of primarily reef fish (43.2%), followed by shellfish (23.2%), canned fish (18.8%), pelagic fish (14%), and other fish (0.8%). Nearly half (47.3%) of aquatic foods were purchased, while 39.7% came from household production.⁸ A 2020 study using 2010 HIES data found that rural areas consumed significantly more locally caught fresh aquatic foods, particularly pelagic fish, while urban areas relied more heavily on canned fish.⁷

Economic contribution to GDP

In 2020, the fisheries sector contributed an estimated 0.66% to Vanuatu's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁹ Revised estimates from the Pacific Community (SPC), place this contribution at 1.53% (2021).⁹

The offshore tuna fishery and certain coastal fisheries (including bêche-de-mer, trochus, and the marine aquarium trade)¹⁰ generate important export

earnings, while artisanal and subsistence fisheries primarily support local markets and subsistence livelihoods. The economic contributions of the latter two to rural communities are significant but difficult to quantify due to the informal nature of local trade.¹

Employment contribution (all)

“Around 12% of the population participates in fishing and aquaculture.”

“About 80% of Vanuatu's population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture or fisheries for subsistence, with over 10% of households earning income from small-scale fishing.”

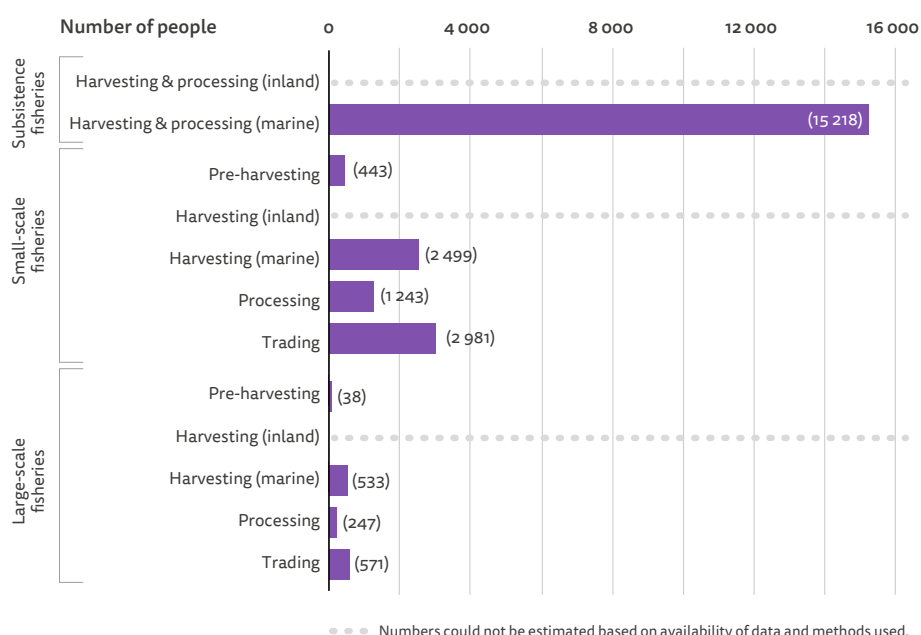
National data

National estimates from 2012 indicated that while only around 250 people were formally employed in the fisheries sector, from a national total workforce of 40,000,¹¹ approximately 15,758 of rural households were engaged in fishing – 73% mainly for home consumption, 26% for both subsistence and occasional sales, and less than 1% primarily for sale. More recent data (2022) suggest that around 12% of the population participates in fishing and aquaculture, including subsistence and small-scale commercial activities.¹

Approximately 80% of Vanuatu’s population lives in rural areas, relying on agriculture or fisheries for subsistence purposes,¹⁶ and more than 10% of households receive income from small-scale fishing activities.¹⁷

Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates

The Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) Initiative¹³ estimated that in 2016, a total of 23,773 individuals^k were engaged in the fisheries sector, including pre-and post-harvest and subsistence fishing^l activities. Most individuals were involved in the marine subsistence sub-sector (see image below). The IHH also estimated that a total of approximately 96,479 people depended, at least partly, on fisheries or subsistence fishing: 66,705 in subsistence fisheries, 25,808 in small scale fisheries (SSF),^m and 3,966 in large scale fisheries.ⁿ

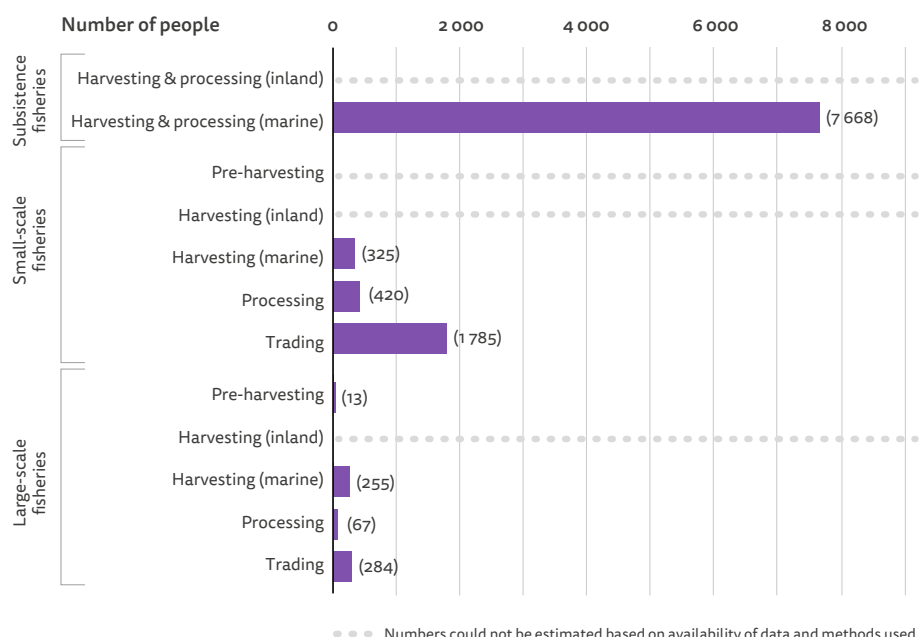


Employment contribution (women)

Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) estimates

The IHH Initiative¹³ estimated that in 2016 a total of 10,817 women were active in fisheries, with the subsistence fisheries sector providing the greatest source of livelihoods (see image below). Women represented 60% of individuals engaged in trading activities as part of SSF. In large-scale

fisheries, women made up 48% of those engaged in harvesting and 50% of those engaged in trading activities. They also accounted for 50% of the total number of people engaged in subsistence fisheries.



Numbers could not be estimated based on availability of data and methods used.

Ni-Vanuatu women make critical, but underrecognized and poorly documented contributions across value chains in the nation's fishing sector. They contribute substantially to food security and economic activity, including community livelihoods, through fishing activities – spanning subsistence, artisanal, and commercial fisheries – as well as processing and trading. However, their contributions remain under-documented and frequently overlooked due in part to narrow definitions of "fishing" that focus primarily on offshore and industrial operations rather than the diverse activities women undertake.

“Women engage in Vanuatu's SSF through diverse activities shaped by local environmental and cultural contexts – including reef gleaning, fishing with handlines and nets from shore or canoes, and diving for octopus in lagoon areas.”

Women are actively involved in Vanuatu's small-scale fisheries in ways adapted to local environments and cultural contexts. In coastal areas, they primarily engage in reef and intertidal gleaning^p – including in mud flats, mangroves, and seagrass beds – collecting shellfish and other marine resources, often by hand or using simple tools, for household consumption and sale. Depending on local ecology and traditions, women also fish using handlines; nets for catching small fish (such as *mangrou* (*Decapterus* spp., *Selar* spp.), picot (*Siganus* spp.), and various species of sardines and herrings); bamboo rods; and other simple gear, often from shore or canoes. In some lagoon environments, many women are skilled divers, particularly for octopus, and some communities report women gleaning with torches and a machete to catch fish or invertebrates.

Diverse fishing practices across islands^q

Significant local variations exist across the archipelago, shaped by environmental and cultural contexts. In the Maskelynes, women fish primarily from canoes using snorkelling gear to target shells and octopus, and fishing lines for finfish. In Port Resolution (Tanna), women and girls fish in the large estuary using small handlines and hooks from shore. In Mere Lava (Banks Islands), where the water is very deep close to the island, they employ a unique technique of using snorkelling gear to visually locate fish before strategically releasing baited lines. In places like Atchin island (off the coast of Malekula), north Pentecost, and in north Efate, women engage in traditionally male-dominated activities, including dropline fishing.¹⁸ Some women in Litslits¹⁸ (Malekula) and Kwamera (Tanna) are known for

their diving skills, and there is also an account of a young woman diving both during the day and at night in Loh (Torres). Whilst deep bottom fishing, which is considered part of coastal fisheries in Vanuatu, is not usually undertaken by women, there is a husband and wife in South Santo who fish together. In Aniwa, Tanna, and Futuna, women fish using bamboo rods. In Futuna, the Banks Islands Group, and the Torres Islands, women, along with men, are known to use traps for fish, lobster and other species. In communities where coconut crabs are harvested commercially, women may also be involved in trapping them. Cultural restrictions also vary – for example, in Waisisi (East Tanna), it is taboo for women to fish from canoes. These examples reflect not only the cultural diversity of Vanuatu’s fisheries but also women’s adaptability and innovation in responding to changing local conditions and environments.

“In Vanuatu, women comprise the majority of individuals selling aquatic products in local markets, and are widely seen as skilled in money management.”

“The Silae Vanua Market Vendors Association represents over 1,000 vendors from Efate and nearby islands, with women comprising about 90% of its membership.”

“Women’s earnings are often reinvested into household needs – particularly food, education, and health – amplifying their societal impact.”

Commercial activities and value chain participation

Beyond small-scale fishing activities, women engage in commercial fishing and post-harvest activities. They dive for trochus, harvest sea cucumbers, and collect mud crabs (*Scylla* spp.) and mangrove oysters.¹⁷ They also play a central role in processing, preserving, marketing, and distributing catches. In Vanuatu, women comprise the majority of individuals selling aquatic products in local markets,¹⁹ and are widely seen as skilled in money management. While men typically handle offshore fishing, women often accompany them on commercial trips or manage the marketing and sale of their catches,¹⁸ serving as critical intermediaries between fishers and consumers. Market associations provide an important platform for promoting women’s active involvement in decision-making and governance around food systems and trade. The Silae Vanua Market Vendors Association, for instance, represents over 1,000 vendors from Efate and surrounding island communities, with women making up approximately 90% of its membership.¹⁹

The economic impact of women’s fishing activities varies considerably between urban and rural contexts. Near urban markets, particularly on Efate, women have developed artisanal fishing businesses, selling fried reef fish with *laplap* (traditional dish) and creating value-added products from their own catches, such as traditional puddings sold in markets and kava bars.²⁰ Some women purchase reef fish from local vendors to prepare and resell processed products.²⁰ In rural areas, fishing remains predominantly subsistence-based, though this is gradually changing with improved market access. For instance, women from Malo Island now specifically target aquatic resources for sale in Luganville markets on the neighbouring island of Santo.

Evidence from Vanuatu and other Pacific Island nations shows that women’s earnings are often reinvested into household needs – particularly food, education, and health – amplifying their societal impact.²¹ Through community-based fishing practices like coconut leaf sweep netting and shellfish gathering, women also sustain cultural practices. In some communities, women are also involved in the monitoring of fish catches and coastal habitats.⁵ These contributions strengthen local stewardship and community cohesion yet remain undervalued in policy and statistics.

Social considerations

Social and cultural dynamics in Vanuatu are shaped by the interplay of three key influences: *Kastom*, religious beliefs, and colonial legacies. *Kastom* – encompassing indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and practices – embodies concepts of community and tradition that remain a central influence in daily life, though its expression varies across regions and cultural groups. While both matrilineal⁵ and patrilineal systems exist, patrilineal structures

are more widespread, shaping gender roles, social status, and women's participation in decision-making processes.²² Christianity, practiced by over 80% of the population, also profoundly shapes social values, community dynamics, and gender expectations.²³ Missionary activity beginning in the 1830s²⁴ reinforced gendered divisions of labour by assigning leadership positions to men while relegating women to domestic roles.²⁵

“While the growing cash-demands of modern life have brought new opportunities, particularly within the market economy, they have also placed additional burdens on women.”

Women in Vanuatu play a foundational role in household and community wellbeing, with responsibilities traditionally spanning food provisioning, including through agricultural work, caregiving, firewood and water collection, and long hours walking to and from their gardens and farms.¹⁸ While the growing cash-demands of modern life have brought new opportunities, particularly within the market economy, they have also placed additional burdens on women. Many now shoulder increased responsibilities to generate income to meet expanding obligations on top of already substantial workloads linked to household, extended family, and community obligations.²⁶

Economic participation

Women's economic participation remains constrained by gendered inequalities in labour force engagement (including formal employment and income-generating activities) and inequitable access to resources. The International Labour Organization has identified addressing gender-discriminatory norms as a key labour rights challenge in Vanuatu.²⁷ In 2024, it was estimated that only 42.9% of Vanuatu's population participated in the labour force,^u with women accounting for 37.9% of this group. Women are overrepresented in the informal sector and face limitations in accessing land and/or credit.

“Gender-discriminatory norms remain a key labour rights challenge in Vanuatu, where women participate less in the workforce, are concentrated in informal work, and face barriers to land and credit.”

Rural–urban divides compound these challenges. With around 80% of the population living in rural areas,²⁸ disparities in livelihoods are pronounced. The 2019–2020 National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) Baseline Survey reported an overall hardship rate^v of 15.9%, but this rises to 20.8% in rural areas, compared to 2% in urban centres – where only 3.3% of hardship-affected individuals reside.^{w,28} In rural areas, women are primarily engaged in agriculture and fishing,^x where geographic isolation, exposure to climate-related vulnerabilities, and limited economic opportunities, in addition to the above mentioned gender-discriminatory norms, exacerbate disadvantage.³⁰ In urban centres like Port Vila, the country's primary economic hub, women have greater access to formal office-based employment. As they often lack access to customary land and sea resources, as well as the agricultural and fishing skills more commonly held by rural women, their participation in subsistence and informal resource-based activities tend to be limited.^y While the NSDP survey found similar hardship rates between men and women, it assumes that resources are shared equally within households – an assumption not always borne out in practice.²⁸

“Labour mobility brings vital income to Vanuatu, but women often bear heightened caregiving burdens and face increased risks of relationship strain, inequalities, and violence during prolonged family separation.”

Pacific labour mobility schemes enable Ni-Vanuatu citizens to take short-term employment positions abroad (e.g., in Australia or New Zealand) in sectors such as horticulture, viticulture, tourism, and agriculture.³¹ The schemes offer significant economic opportunities, particularly for men,³² with many workers earning substantially higher incomes than available domestically.³³ Remittances sent home, as both cash and material goods, make important contributions to household income, investment, and national economic resilience.³⁴ Yet this labour mobility also presents social challenges. Family separation, spousal stress, and shifts in household and community dynamics have been linked to relationship strain, increased vulnerability to violence, emerging inequalities, and dependency pressures.^{33,35} Some communities report that the departure of skilled

workers overseas diminishes local capacity and contributes to "brain drain," affecting essential services and development efforts.³⁶ Recognizing the economic and social benefits of seasonal work and accompanying challenges, the Vanuatu government recently launched the *Labour Mobility Reintegration Strategy* and *2025-2028 Action Plan* focusing in particular on reintegration as a tool to promote migrant worker well-being, family welfare, child protection, and the retention of essential human resources within Vanuatu.³⁷

"Girls' enrolment in secondary, tertiary, and vocational training is rising in Vanuatu, yet rural barriers and cost burdens persist, underscoring the need for targeted education support to reduce hardship levels and promote gender equity."

Education

While Vanuatu's NSDP promotes education for all, barriers remain.^z Primary and secondary schooling are not compulsory or free, leaving costs of enrolment, transport, and materials to families – where boys are often prioritised. Access is particularly limited in rural areas, due to teacher shortages^{aa} and with students often sent away to stay with family in urban towns.^{ab} However, recent reforms, including school grants for early childhood and primary education (2018),²² have improved educational access, leading to higher secondary and tertiary enrolment among girls.³⁰ Rising female enrolment in technical and vocational training is also narrowing gender gaps in education.³⁰ Given the close links between economic disparities, education, employment, and income sources, targeted educational interventions to uplift both men and women, particularly in rural areas where educational attainment is lower, is a critical component of reducing hardship levels and promoting gender equity.³⁹

Women's rights and political empowerment

"Vanuatu upholds equal rights in law, yet customary systems can constrain women's land access and participation in governance, creating ongoing challenges for gender equity."

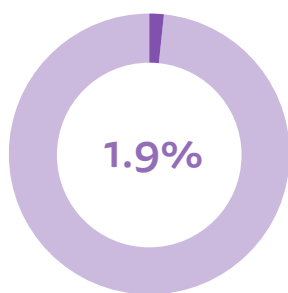
Vanuatu's 1980 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms regardless of race, origin, religious or traditional beliefs, political opinions, language, or sex. It also specifies that laws enacted to provide special protections or benefits for underprivileged groups – including women and children – are not considered contrary to equal treatment laws. However, constitutional commitments to uphold customary law (*Kastom*) can complicate gender equity efforts, particularly in areas including land rights and governance. Customary practices and rules as decreed by local chiefs, or by the national *Malvatumauri* Council of Chiefs, which often carry legal weight, particularly in rural areas,^{ac} often reinforce patriarchal structures. While the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act (2013)* promotes gender parity in nationality rights, broader governance structures still pose challenges for women's equal participation.

Land and marine tenure

"Although the Custom Land Management Act enables women's participation, in practice men retain authority in land governance and often mediate access. Comparable male dominance persists across customary marine tenure systems."

Land in Vanuatu is deeply tied to identity and security, often described as being to Ni-Vanuatu "what a mother is to a baby." Many areas were historically matrilineal – such as the Torres and Banks Islands, Maewo, North Pentecost, east Aoba (*Ambae*), *Espiritu Santo*, and *Efate* and its offshore islands as far north as *Tongoa* – with land passed through women's lineage, and women holding important roles in land stewardship.^{ad,41} Case studies from *Raga* (North Pentecost) and *Mele* (South *Efate*) show how external influences – including colonial systems and religious pressures – and evolving interpretations of *Kastom* have increasingly restricted women's roles in land governance.⁴² The *Custom Land Management Act (2013)* formally enables women's participation in land-related customary institutions, but in practice, men hold primary decision-making powers, and access is often mediated through male relatives. According to the 2020 Census,⁴³ 73% of households reported holding customary land tenure, yet the NSDP Baseline Survey shows that male-headed households maintain greater access to land compared to female-headed households.²⁸ While the Land Registry lacks sex-disaggregated data, an earlier estimate from

“Gender equity efforts have been constrained by limited integration of women’s machinery into wider governance, leaving sectors like fisheries without adequate support to address persistent gender disparities.”



Percentage of seats held by women in Parliament (2025)

“The 2013 amendment to the Municipalities Act, which introduced a 30% quota for women’s representation in municipal councils, has led to tangible progress.”

2015 suggested that only 30% of lease applicants were women.²² Similarly, customary marine tenure systems, where exclusive right to harvest marine resources from adjacent shallow waters are traditionally allocated to the heads of each family through its chief or its constituent clans or families, are predominantly male-controlled. Due to the patriarchal systems in Vanuatu, men hold primary decision-making power of access and use to those areas and resources.⁴⁴ Increasing land scarcity and commodification risk further undermining social cohesion, making inclusive participation of women and men in land and marine governance essential.

In Vanuatu, responsibility for advancing gender equity is primarily handled by the Department of Women’s Affairs.⁴⁵ Until recent years, a lack of integration of the national women’s machinery within broader governance structures had hindered efforts to address gender disparities, with fisheries organizations, for instance, struggling to address gender issues in the sector on their own.⁴⁶

Political representation and leadership

Women remain underrepresented in political life in Vanuatu. Since independence in 1980, only seven women have served in Parliament: Hilda Lini, Maria Crowby, Isabelle Donald, Leinavao Tasso, Eta Rory, Gloria Julia King, and Marie Louis Paulette Milne. Only two (Hilda Lini and Isabelle Donald) have served multiple terms. Across the three snap elections held since 2019, women candidates remained underrepresented and achieved limited electoral success: In 2020, only 6% of parliamentary candidates were women (17 out of 295), in 2022 only eight women ran, with one elected,⁴⁷ and in 2024 seven women ran, with one elected. The election of Gloria Julia King in 2022, the first woman Member of Parliament in 15 years, marked a historic moment for gender representation.⁴⁸

Lack of financial resources and political support has been cited as a key barrier for women candidates.²² Implementation of gender equality initiatives is hampered by limited government funding, weak monitoring frameworks, and poor coordination between national and provincial planning. Data collection remains inadequate, with limited sex-disaggregated information across ministries.

While progress to improve women’s representation at the national level has been limited, and there are currently no Temporary Special Measures in place to advance this,²² reforms at the municipal level have shown promise. The 2013 amendment to the *Municipalities Act*, which introduced a 30% quota for women’s representation in municipal councils, has led to tangible progress,⁴⁸ with women holding 25.6% of council positions and 7.1% of provincial council positions (seven councillors) between 2018 and 2021.²² In the September 2019 municipal election, six female councillors were elected in Luganville,²² and in November 2023, voters in Vanuatu’s Sanma Province elected six women and seven men as councillors.⁴⁹

The implementation of the *National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) 2020-2030*,⁴⁵ has led to further decentralization of gender initiatives and strengthened gender inclusion at the provincial and community level. The policy introduced Provincial Gender Equality Action Plans and technical working groups, improving access to decision-making, services, and livelihoods, including for women in rural and remote areas.³⁰

Gender integration in public institutions

Women’s leadership in the public sector has also improved. The *Public Service Act (1998)* promotes equal opportunity in public employment, and by 2019, two of the seven Director Generals (28.5%) and eight of the 43 Directors (18.6%) in government departments were women. While these

“Women comprise 24% of Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries and Biosecurity staff and more than 35% of Vanuatu Fisheries Department personnel.”

“Bride price (*brad praes*) traditionally honours women and strengthens social ties, yet its misinterpretation today can undermine women’s rights and, in some cases, be used to justify domestic violence and limit women’s autonomy.”

“Sixty percent of women in Vanuatu report having experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and 30% faced sexual abuse before age 15 – among the highest rates recorded in the Pacific and globally.”

numbers remain low, progress continues in appointing women to senior public sector positions. Of note is that more than 35% of Vanuatu Fisheries Department (VFD) staff are women.⁵⁰

In 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries and Biosecurity (MALFFB) finalised its *Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) 2023-2026*, designed to align the ministry’s activities with the *NGEP 2020-2030*.⁵¹ The GEAP, which also encompasses the fisheries sector, outlines actions under the following themes: building capacity for gender equality; mainstreaming gender in policies, programmes, and activities; providing direct support to female farmers, fishers, and foresters; and ensuring effective monitoring, reporting, and accountability.⁵¹ Approximately 24% of MALFFB staff are women, and while many hold administrative roles, the MALFFB GEAP aims to enhance gender balance by increasing women’s representation in senior officer and management positions by 2025.⁵¹

At the time of writing, VFD is in transition from being part of MALFFB to the Ministry of Fisheries, Ocean, and Maritime Affairs, a new government structure established in February 2025 to oversee the sustainable management and governance of the nation’s marine resources. Although VFD still maintains a gender focal point under the National Disaster Management Office’s cluster system, the shift to MALFFB introduces uncertainty around how gender commitments will be maintained moving forward.

Marriage practices and gender-based violence

Marriage practices reflect ongoing gender challenges. The legal marriage age is 21, but with parental consent, girls can marry at 16 and boys at 18.²² Early marriage remains prevalent, particularly in isolated communities. Between 2012 and 2018, an estimated 3% of women aged 20–24 had married by age 15, and 21% by age 18 compared to 5% of men married by age 18.²² Bride price (*brad praes* in Bislama) is a customary arrangement that varies across islands, with 81% of married women reporting its practice in a 2009 survey.⁵² Traditionally, the practice involves reciprocal exchanges of goods – including agricultural produce, livestock, and woven mats, not just monetary payment – between the groom’s and bride’s families. These exchanges are intended to honour women,^{ae} strengthen family and social ties,⁵³ and define community relationships and identity. The practice is part of an oral tradition typically passed from parents to children about its cultural significance and proper observance.^{af} However, concerns have emerged about how the practice is understood and applied in contemporary contexts. Weakening of intergenerational transmission of traditional values have contributed to misinterpretation or distortion of the practice. In some cases, bride price has come to be viewed as implying men’s ownership of women. The practice is increasingly cited as contributing to gender inequality and justifying domestic violence, with 32% of respondents to the 2009 survey believing bride price justified spousal abuse.⁵² These views may act as barriers for women seeking support or wanting to leave harmful relationships.

Violence against women and girls is widespread in Vanuatu. National survey data shows that 60% of women aged 15–49 report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime and 30% experienced sexual abuse before age 15 – among the highest rates recorded in the Pacific region and globally.⁵² Focus group discussions suggest that women and girls with disabilities, particularly those who are deaf, may face heightened risks of sexual violence, with formal reporting and justice mechanisms remaining largely inaccessible, and the absence of disability-disaggregated data limiting visibility and response. Vanuatu’s Penal Code set the age of consent for sexual activity at 15 for both genders.

“The NGEAP contains provisions aiming to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, and the *Family Protection Act (2008)* provides a legal framework for addressing GBV – the region’s first dedicated domestic violence legislation.”

“The Vanuatu Women’s Centre, [is] the country’s leading GBV support hub, with branches across five provinces and a network of 39 community-led Committees Against Violence Against Women across the islands.”

“Initiatives such as the Male Advocates Programme and ‘Rod Blong Jenis’ campaign both engage men as allies in advancing gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls in their communities.”

The above mentioned 2009 survey found that 72% of women who reported having their first sexual experience before age 15 indicated they were forced or coerced into it.²² While Vanuatu’s sexual assault legislation uses gender-neutral language, certain legal terms, such as “indecent assault”, require updates to align with international human rights standards. Structural and societal factors, including the normalization of violence in intimate relationships,⁵² and chiefs and pastors often prioritizing reconciliation and community harmony over individual rights,⁵³ compound the challenge. However, Vanuatu has taken significant steps to strengthen its response to gender-based violence (GBV) through capacity-building and legal protections.

The NGEAP contains provisions aiming to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, while the *Family Protection Act (2008)* provides a legal framework for addressing GBV – making Vanuatu the first Pacific Island country to pass specific legislation on domestic violence.⁵⁴ Specifically, it enabled the establishment of key support mechanisms such as the Vanuatu Women’s Centre Hotline and the Victim Support Centre, offering counselling, legal assistance, and shelter to survivors. The Act also provides women with a means for protection from violent partners through restraining orders.⁵⁵ Critically, the legislation addresses the challenges faced by women in rural areas without court access by authorizing notable community leaders such as chiefs and church leaders appointed by the Department of Women’s Affairs as ‘registered persons’ to intervene in cases of violence, ensuring protection extends beyond urban centres to remote communities.⁵⁶

These efforts complement those of the Vanuatu Women’s Centre, the country’s leading GBV support hub, with branches across five provinces and a network of 39 community-led Committees Against Violence Against Women across the islands.

Institutional responses have also improved. Efforts have included training police officers, magistrates, and health personnel to provide better support for survivors and establishing the Family Protection Unit within the Vanuatu Police Force, focused specifically on domestic violence cases. In addition, Vanuatu released a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for GBV response establishing a coordinated, survivor-centred approach across all health facilities, integrating medical, psychological, and legal support across services. Such an approach enhances long-term support and systemic accountability in responding to GBV.⁵⁷

Despite these initiatives, law enforcement remains inconsistent, and access to fair treatment and legal redress remains limited,⁵⁸ especially outside urban areas. Further action is needed to improve service delivery, ensure rural access, and expand awareness campaigns.⁵⁹ More broadly, efforts are needed to change societal attitudes toward violence and gender equality that are grounded in human rights-based approaches and trauma-informed healing. Initiatives such as the Male Advocates Programme and “Rod Blong Jenis”⁶⁰ campaign both engage men as allies in advancing gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls in their communities. Together with local leaders and partners, including World Vision Vanuatu and CARE in Vanuatu, these efforts are central to community-wide engagement and capacity-building efforts that challenge harmful norms and promote respectful, human rights-based relationships,⁶¹ in addition to strengthening access to protection and support, especially in rural communities.⁶²

Religion and social change

Christianity is deeply embedded in Vanuatu's social fabric and often influences gender roles. While faith-based values can present challenges to gender equality, faith-based organisations can also be valuable allies. For example, some civil society groups have successfully partnered with the Council of Churches to promote gender equity and GBV prevention through church networks, including integration into sermons.⁵⁶

Key frameworks promoting gender equality and their ratification status^{am}

- ✓ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) acceded to in 1995.⁵⁷ Vanuatu submitted its combined joint fourth and fifth periodic report in 2014.⁵⁸
- ✓ CEDAW Optional Protocol^{an} accepted in 2007.⁵⁷
- ✓ Beijing Platform for Action, with the Beijing+25 national review published in 2019⁶⁰ and the Beijing+30 report published in 2024.³⁰

While considered a non-binding agreement, Vanuatu also endorsed the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED)⁶¹ adopted in 2012, reaffirmed in 2015 and revitalised in 2023.^{60,62} The PLGED is seen as a key regional commitment to gender equality and social inclusion.

Gender equality, women's empowerment, and the rights of women and girls^{ap} also features prominently in the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (Samoa Pathway)⁶³—an outcome document of the 2014 Small Island Developing States Conference. In addition, Vanuatu together with other Pacific Island Countries and Territories endorsed the new Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2018-2030, which aims to “accelerate the implementation of gender commitments at all levels in order to achieve gender equality and the promotion and protection of the human rights of all women and girls, in all their diversity.”⁶⁴

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

Not available for any of the years published (2014, 2019, 2023).^{aq}

Gender Inequality Index (GII)

The GII^{ar} value is given on a scale from 0 to 1, with 0 being 0% inequality, indicating women “fare equally” in comparison to men and 1 being 100% inequality, indicating women “fare poorly” in comparison to men. The assessment of women ‘faring equally’ or ‘poorly’ compared to men refers to their relative standing in health, political representation, education, and economic participation.

Value (2023)
0.556

Rank (2023)
147
(out of 172 countries)

Gender in fisheries governance

Thirty-six fisheries governance documents^{as,at} were identified and reviewed as of July 2025, covering a range of policies, management plans, laws, regulations, and action strategies related to the governance of Vanuatu's fisheries sector. Of these, nineteen documents reference women or gender in some regard: seven through explicit mention of women or gender

(without feminine pronouns), twelve solely through the inclusion of feminine pronouns (she/her), and none through both.

Two governance documents reference women's right to a voice in the sector. The **Revised Tuna Fishery Management Plan (2014)** calls for support to increase women's involvement in fisheries decision-making. The **Vanuatu National Deep-Bottom Fish Fishery Management Plan (2016)** notes that women's groups were included in the consultation process during the plan's development.

Two other documents briefly, yet notably, recognize women's roles in the fisheries value chain. The **Vanuatu National Plan of Action on Sharks 2015–2018 (2014)** encourages the development of small businesses—including within women's groups—by providing training on shark meat preparation. The **Vanuatu National Marine Aquarium Trade Management Plan (2008)** acknowledges the presence of women in trade roles by using the term "middleman/woman" in the definition of "buyer." By contrast, the term "traditional fishing right owner" is defined as an "individual, family or clan" recognized by the village as holding fishing rights. The word "individual" is gender neutral—women are not explicitly included or excluded from this definition.

The **Vanuatu National Fisheries Sector Policy 2016–2031 (2016)** highlights the successful recruitment of women into the Fisheries Department and, in 2014, noted the training of the country's first female fisheries observer. The policy focuses on three strategic areas: 1) sustainable fisheries governance, 2) access to finance and markets, and 3) sustainable growth, food security, and livelihoods. Gender equality is promoted throughout as a guiding principle. Women's groups are identified as key stakeholders. Specific actions and indicators include: increasing gender equity and women's participation at every level in the Fisheries Department, ensuring one to two women members are in each provincial fishers' association, and promoting 20–30% participation of women and youth in fisheries training programmes.

The **Vanuatu National Roadmap for Coastal Fisheries 2019–2030 (2019)** works to "secure sustainable management of coastal resources" and emphasizes the importance of meeting the "food security and livelihood needs of the men, women and children of Vanuatu." The roadmap identifies three primary barriers, one of which is the lack of equitable and inclusive decision-making. In response, it outlines actions such as recognizing women's contributions to coastal fisheries and promoting their inclusion in community-based fisheries management. It also identifies women and children as priority groups for nutrition-focused fish consumption. Among four key enabling conditions for success, the first is that "all interventions must be designed to ensure equitable opportunity for engagement and benefit within and across stakeholder groups," including efforts to "minimize, for example, gender-based marginalization."

The **MALFFB Gender Equality Action Plan 2023–2026** focuses on "transforming primary production in Vanuatu through Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women," within the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries, and Bio-security. It highlights that primary production is often a family endeavour, with women playing vital roles. It identifies multiple barriers women face—including GBV, lack of access to financial and technical services, limited training opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making—and notes that these challenges undermine the entire productive sector. The plan sets out objectives to mainstream gender, promote equal opportunity across all development efforts, recognize women's contributions, and ensure accountability through inclusive

participation of men, women, youth, and vulnerable groups.

Roles in the fisheries sector are predominantly framed in masculine terms, including through the use of male pronouns in governance documents. The use of feminine pronouns indicates recognition that women may also hold various leadership, regulatory, and/or operational roles in the sector. The **Fisheries Act (Cap. 315) (2005)** includes “she” and “her” in reference to the Director of Fisheries, an authorised officer, an observer, a person in possession or control of explosives or poison, and a person who commits an offence. Similarly, the **Fisheries Act (No. 10 of 2014) (2014)** applies feminine pronouns to a wide array of positions including the owner of a fishing vessel, the Director of Fisheries, the Minister, a holder of an aquaculture license, seafood inspector, authorised officer, observer, port sampler, vessel operator, and person who commits an offence. The **Fisheries (Amendment) Act (No. 2 of 1989) (1989)** includes “his or her” in reference to an authorised observer, while the **Fisheries (Amendment) Act No. 38 of 2019 (2019)** includes feminine pronouns for both the Director of Fisheries and a community-based authorised officer.

Several regulatory documents echo this language. The **Fisheries Regulations (Amendment) Order 2012 (S.I. No. 88 of 2012) (2012)** uses “he or she” in reference to operators of Vanuatu-flagged vessels, while the **Fisheries Regulations (Amendment) Order 2013 (S.I. No. 141 of 2013) (2013)** includes feminine pronouns for the Director of Fisheries and for individuals in possession or exportation of bêche-de-mer. The **Fisheries Regulations (Cap. 315) (1983)** includes feminine pronouns in reference to persons involved in the prohibited taking, possessing, selling, or purchasing of various marine species. The **Fisheries Regulations Order, 2009 (2009)** also includes “his or her” and “he or she” when referring to vessel operators, the Director of Fisheries, authorised officers, and those in possession of prohibited species. The **General Conditions for Foreign Fishing Vessels and Locally Based Foreign Fishing Vessels (2) (Cap. 315) (2003)** includes feminine pronouns for both vessel operators and observers.

The **Conservation and Measurement Measure for Deep-Bottom Fish Fishery Order 2012 (No. 87 of 2012) (2012)** includes feminine pronouns in reference to the possession or sale of deep-bottom longline and dropline fishing gear. The **Vanuatu National Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (2015)** includes “he or she” when referring to the Maritime Administrator. Lastly, the **Vanuatu National Sea Cucumber Fishery Management Plan 2019–2024 (2019)** includes feminine pronouns to refer to the licensee responsible for harvesting and exporting sea cucumber, as well as to the Director of Fisheries.

Threats and drivers of change in fisheries

Several key threats to and drivers of change in Vanuatu’s coastal ecosystems and examples of how these may be addressed are outlined below. Threats and drivers of change to fisheries may have specific gender dimensions associated with them, making gender integration necessary in efforts to improve adaptation and foster resilience in the face of change.

Natural hazards – Many of Vanuatu’s islands are in a seismically and volcanically active area, increasing the country’s susceptibility to geological and other natural hazards such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, tropical cyclones, and flooding. The annual likelihood of a natural disaster occurring is estimated at almost 60% and affects approximately 12% of the population.⁶⁵ Landslides, heavy rainfall, runoff, and volcanic ash deposits all lead to sedimentation of coral reefs with significant

“After the 2017-18 Ambae eruptions, communities observed new algal growth on reefs and contamination of previously safe seafood, highlighting the role of local and Indigenous knowledge in early warning and health responses.”

“After TC Pam, fishing gear provided as part of emergency response efforts did not always cater for the different needs of men and women.”

“VFD’s Standard Operating Procedure for disaster preparedness and response, launched in 2023, addresses some of the gendered disparities in disaster response.”

impacts on corals themselves as well as associated fish populations.⁶⁶ Such environmental changes also lead to increased risks of ciguatera fish poisoning.⁶⁷ After the 2017–2018 eruptions on Ambae, residents observed new algal growth and contamination of previously safe fish and invertebrates, underscoring the value of local observations and Indigenous knowledge for developing early warning systems and guiding health responses.⁶⁷

Vanuatu is particularly exposed to tropical cyclones and experiences 2 to 3 events each cyclone season, which can significantly impact marine and coastal habitats.⁶⁵ Coral reefs, coastal areas and fishing infrastructure are often damaged during cyclones and recovery can be slow.^{68,69} Vanuatu has been impacted by four severe (Category 4 or 5) tropical cyclones (TC) since 2015 – TC Pam in 2015, TC Harold in 2020, TC Kevin and TC Judy within 2 days of each other in March 2023, and TC Lola in October 2023. The most severe occurred in 2015, when TC Pam struck Vanuatu, resulting in the loss of fisheries-supporting habitats, paddle canoes and motor vessels, with significant impacts on rural communities.⁷⁰ Agriculture and marine fisheries underpin the food security and livelihoods of rural communities. After TC Pam, agricultural crops were significantly damaged and for coastal communities, marine resources were a readily available option to fill gaps in household food and finances. Fishing equipment that was provided as part of the emergency response did not always cater for the different needs of men and women. Where they were weighted toward the types of fishing activities carried out by men, men were better able to respond to impacts than women.⁷¹

Natural hazards can also result in human displacement, forcing people to leave behind their homes, assets, and livelihoods.⁶⁵ On 17 December 2024, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck near Port Vila, causing major damage to homes, businesses, markets, the main port, and nearby coral reef habitats. Thousands of people were displaced, due to damaged infrastructure, and fishing as well as market sales were impacted. Displacement can also lead to increased pressure on local reefs, as experienced after the COVID-19 pandemic and, as mentioned above, following disasters – including TC, volcano eruptions, and earthquakes. VFD SOP for disaster preparedness and response, launched in 2023, address some of the gendered disparities in disaster response by requiring the collection of gender disaggregated data to better understand differential risks, needs, and impacts of natural hazards on fisheries and aquaculture (see *Women rights and political empowerment* section).⁷²

Population growth and economic pressure – Increasing human pressure on Vanuatu’s ecosystems is expected to increase demand on marine resources and present growing sustainability challenges.⁷³ Vanuatu’s population has grown from 186,678 in 1999 to 331,470 in 2025,⁷⁴ with 64% of people living within 1km of the coast⁷⁴ and relying heavily on coastal fisheries for food security and livelihoods. This demographic trend underscores the need for inclusive and sustainable fisheries management to safeguard food and nutrition security as well as well-being.⁷³ Species that hold particular economic or Kastom significance, such as sea turtles harvested for cultural purposes or coconut crabs collected for income, are especially vulnerable to intensified harvesting.^{au} In some instances, persistent pressure has already prompted regulatory action; for example, triton shells, once heavily exploited for tourism, are now legally protected.^{av}

Climate change – Vanuatu is highly vulnerable to climate-related hazards. The country is already experiencing significant impacts, including sea-level rise, coastal erosion, more intense storms and cyclones, changing rainfall patterns, and rising ocean temperatures.⁷⁵ Mean sea surface

“More intense storms and cyclones reduce the number of safe fishing days, [...] limiting fish caught for food and income and increasing household pressures, often placing an additional burden on women to manage food shortages.”

“Vanuatu’s youth-led initiative seeking an ICJ advisory opinion on climate change led to a 2025 ruling affirming states’ obligations to prevent and address climate harm, marking a major advance in global climate governance and legal accountability.”

temperature (SST) in the Pacific Ocean has warmed by about 0.9°C for the period 1982–2020, warming at a few tenths of a degree per decade,⁷⁵ contributing to marine ecosystem stress and coral bleaching.⁷⁶ Projections indicate further increases: by 2030, yearly average SST is expected to rise by 1°C per year,⁷⁷ and by 2050 by +0.6 to +1.1°C under a medium (SSP2-4.5) emissions scenario.⁷⁵ Marine heatwaves, influenced by El Niño events, are projected to increase from around 25 days per year in 1982 to 80–150 days by 2050, causing widespread coral and fish mortality.⁷⁵ These changes pose profound risks for fisheries by reducing fish stocks and catch potential. Additionally, warming waters are driving tuna and other migratory species important to the local economy and livelihoods eastward and away from Vanuatu’s waters.⁷⁸ This shift may push tuna fishing into international waters and reduce catches for local fishing fleets.² Climate change impacts threaten habitat structure and function as well as reef fish communities, with implications for food security, tourism, livelihoods, and the economy.⁷⁶ Communities often respond by temporarily opening *tabu* areas to secure food during El Niño events, severe storms, or natural disasters, following guidance from VFD to do so sustainably.^{aw} For example, communities on the island of Aniwa temporarily opened their *tabu* area during the COVID-19 pandemic, when cargo vessel disruptions limited food supplies, and again during the 2023 El Niño event to help meet local food needs.

More intense storms and cyclones also reduce the number of safe fishing days, particularly for artisanal fishers that use vessels to travel further from shore or to nearshore fish aggregating devices (FADs). This not only limits fish caught for food and income, but also increases household pressures, often placing an additional burden on women to manage food shortages during prolonged periods of unsuitable ocean conditions.^{ax}

Vanuatu’s youth-led initiative to request an International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on states’ obligations regarding climate change⁷⁹ represents a landmark moment in global climate leadership. This effort, subsequently supported by many Pacific Island countries, sought legal clarification on the responsibilities of states to prevent, reduce, and redress transboundary climate harm. In 2025, the ICJ affirmed that states do hold international obligations to take effective action on climate change, including preventing foreseeable harm to other states that bear disproportionate impacts.⁸⁰ This represents a significant advancement in global climate governance and underscores the pivotal role of Pacific youth and Vanuatu’s leadership in shaping international legal norms on climate justice.

Illegal fishing – Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing can also pose a threat to Vanuatu’s fisheries. In 2013, Vanuatu was issued a yellow card warning by the European commission for insufficient oversight of fishing activities carried out by Vanuatu flagged vessels operating in national and international waters.⁸¹ The warning was issued as Vanuatu was developing its legal framework to combat IUU fishing. The warning prompted Vanuatu to improve its monitoring programme, leading to a green card being issued in 2014.⁸¹ Concerns remain around the use of trans-shipment in offshore fisheries, which allows vessels to spend more time at sea and increase catches,⁸² and may in some cases be used to conceal IUU fishing.⁸³ Trans-shipment may also increase the risk of illegally caught fish entering the market by enabling the mixing of legal and illegal catches.⁸² As part of efforts to develop a more robust framework to combat IUU fishing, VFD bans trans-shipment unless an observer is on board and prior approval has been given.⁸³ Women in Vanuatu are increasingly taking on roles within VFD, particularly in data entry and management, as part of efforts to address IUU fishing. Currently, five female observers are actively serving aboard fishing vessels.

“Crown-of-thorns starfish (*Acanthaster planci*) have posed recurring threats to Vanuatu's coral reefs, with documented outbreaks since the late 1980s.”

Crown-of-thorns starfish – Crown-of-thorns starfish (*Acanthaster planci*) (COTS) have posed recurring threats to Vanuatu's coral reefs, with documented outbreaks since the late 1980s.⁸⁴ Major events have been recorded on Santo (2004), Efate, and the surrounding islands of Moso, Emao, Nguna, and Pele (2006–2009 and 2012–2014).⁸⁵ More recent outbreaks include a “migrating” event around Efate, beginning in Vila Harbour in 2017 and progressing northeast to Havannah Harbour in 2018–2019. COTS outbreaks have also been reported on Aore, Malekula, and Aniwa.^{86,87}

As a major coral predator, COTS can cause extensive reef destruction.⁸⁸ In north Efate, reefs heavily impacted by outbreaks in 2006–2009 and 2012–2014 continue to show low live coral cover (5–12%) and slow recovery,⁸⁹ whereas unaffected reefs maintain much higher live coral cover (30–70% at Lelepa Island),⁶⁹ well above the Pacific regional average of 25.5%. These outbreaks are linked to human pressures, including overfishing of natural predators, terrestrial runoff, and nutrient enrichment.⁸⁸

The impacts extend beyond coral loss: degraded reefs reduce habitat for small-bodied fish, which in turn lowers the productivity of predatory and herbivorous fish species.⁹⁰ This threatens the resilience of reef ecosystems and further undermines reef fisheries already under pressure from climate change and fishing.⁸⁸

Gender in ODA allocation for fisheries

Between 2012 and 2022, Vanuatu received a total of USD 13,06 million in fisheries Official Development Assistance (ODA),^{ay,az} of which 30% (USD 3,98 million) was allocated to gender equality and women's empowerment in fisheries (i.e. tagged with gender markers 1 or 2). No gender focused financing for Vanuatu scored as 'Principal' (gender marker 2). Fisheries aid to Vanuatu represents 14% of fisheries aid to the Melanesian subregion, whilst gender-equality focused fisheries aid to Vanuatu represents 18% of gender focused fisheries aid to the Pacific Island region.

Of the ODA screened for gender markers, gender-equality focused financing for fisheries in Vanuatu came from Japan (70%) and Australia (30%).



Examples of programmes or initiatives aiming to advance gender equality in fisheries

Wan Smolbag, a grassroots theatre organization in Vanuatu, has achieved significant success in highlighting social development issues through television, comics, community-based theatre, local movie productions, and radio episodes, including challenges around gender inclusion and Community-Based Fisheries Management (CBFM). In partnership with VFD the theatre group created *Twist Mo Spin* a play about a young couple navigating community life (social pressure and responsibilities), gender roles, and resource decline, followed by interactive workshops that engage rural audiences in sustainable management discussions. This theatre-for-development approach has proven more effective than conventional meetings for addressing sensitive social issues as it uses Vanuatu's cultural tradition of oral communication to break down barriers to participation and enables critical reflection, inclusive discussion, and collective action around shared fisheries management challenges.⁹¹ Wan Smolbag also supports the **Vanua Tai Resource Monitoring Network**, established in 1995, which plays an important role in coastal fisheries management, conservation, and community livelihoods across most islands of Vanuatu. The network comprises a large group of trained community-based resource monitors, including many women, who collect environmental data, raise awareness,

and help build community ownership of conservation.⁹² Dedicated women's networks within Vanua Tai create additional entry points for engagement, including community initiatives such as the Tanna Women's Resilience Network. Women now hold leadership roles in Vanua Tai, including as chairs of the Shefa provincial network and at community level. Vanuatu's first female Vanua Tai Champion and Chair of a subnetwork has also represented Vanuatu at the Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (an annual regional mechanism to engage civil society organisations and other non-state actors).⁹³ Women represented Vanuatu at the dialogue in 2023, 2024, and 2025, and were selected for their contributions to coastal fisheries, and to promote women's leadership in the sector. The work of Wan Smolbag and Vanua Tai is supported by a range of donors, including the Governments of New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, and the European Union.

VFD has led several events to actively promote and elevate the role of women in fisheries. The **Vanuatu Women in Fisheries Forum** (March 2024), hosted by VFD with support from FAO and the Australian Government, served as a platform for learning and advocacy, allowing women fisherfolk to voice their needs and concerns.⁹⁴ The annual Fisheries Symposium (**Fish Toktok**), also organised by VFD, brings together fishers, including women leaders, community fishworkers, and female VFD staff, to highlight women's contributions across the sector. Women are actively represented on panels covering environment, trade, and fisheries, and dedicated sessions with community women help elevate their perspectives. Mixed gender working groups further enable inclusive dialogue on key issues.^{ba}

Women I Tok Tok Tugeta (2015 – ongoing), supported by ActionAid Australia, is a locally driven forum aiming to connect Vanuatu women and support women leadership. The network brings together women's collectives to support locally led climate change action and disaster response. It operates across seven islands and offers a variety of different programmes and training, including in fisheries. Some network members are directly involved in fisheries or come from fishing communities. Since 2015, the network has created women's information centres and safe spaces across three islands, successfully lobbied for protective measures and disability-inclusive emergency protocols, developed a women-led disaster response and early warning system, driven uptake of the COVID-19 vaccination, and coordinated a women-led response to cyclone events.¹⁰⁵

The **Vanuatu community-based climate resilience project (VCCRP)** (2024 – ongoing), funded under the Green Climate Fund and implemented by Save the Children Australia in partnership with the Government of Vanuatu's Ministry of Climate Change, aims to strengthen the climate resilience of highly vulnerable rural and coastal communities by supporting targeted adaptation activities in the fisheries and agriculture sectors.¹⁰⁶ Key objectives include expanding access to climate information and locally relevant early warning systems, establishing community disaster-risk reduction committees, restoring and protecting 11,600 hectares of priority agricultural and coastal fisheries areas, and training fishers in climate-resilient coastal resource management alongside smallholders adopting climate-smart practices.¹⁰⁶ The project includes a gender assessment, gender action plan, and gender-specific output indicators (e.g., "Women-led climate-resilient food processing and preservation established to support food security and diversification of livelihoods options").¹⁰⁶

The Pacific Ridge to Reef (R2R) Programme (2015 – ongoing) is a Global Environment Facility (GEF) initiative designed to promote sustainable development in Pacific SIDS through integrated environmental management. Regionally, it is executed by SPC through the GEF Pacific R2R International Waters project.⁹⁹ The programme supports 14 Pacific Island Countries and

"The Vanuatu community-based climate resilience project (VCCRP) aims to strengthen the climate resilience of highly vulnerable rural and coastal communities by supporting targeted adaptation activities in the fisheries and agriculture sectors."

Territories, including Vanuatu, aligning its efforts with each country's specific priorities.¹⁰⁰ Recognizing the important connection between gender equality and environmental sustainability, the programme also incorporates a gender mainstreaming strategy to promote inclusivity, sustainable livelihoods, and resilience.^{100,101}

“The Markets for Change (M4C) project helped women develop savings schemes, gain financial and leadership training and increased resilience through grassroots-led, gender-responsive governance.”

The **Markets for Change (M4C) project**, led by UN Women in partnership with UN Development Programme and the Governments of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, supports the social and economic empowerment of women vendors as well as safer, more inclusive and non-discriminatory marketplaces in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.¹⁰² In Vanuatu, the project works with three major markets as well as five ring road markets in Shefa Province. Notable achievements during its first phase (2014–2021) include the Silae Vanua Market Vendor Association in Port Vila, which formed after TC Pam and became a platform for thousands of women vendors to engage in governance, improve working conditions, and rebuild livelihoods.¹⁰³ Across Vanuatu, M4C helped women develop savings schemes, gain financial and leadership training, and increased resilience through grassroots-led, gender-responsive governance.¹⁰³ Now in its second phase (2022–2026), the project supports the creation and strengthening of representative marketplace groups to enhance the roles and influence of women vendors. It also aims to improve financial literacy, increase access to financial services, and support agricultural skills development. The project works with local governments, market management, and other stakeholders to make markets more gender-responsive, safe, accessible, and resilient to disaster risks and climate change. M4C also promotes gender-responsive governance by engaging market vendor associations, civil society organizations, and UN agencies.¹⁰⁴

The Coalitions for Change in Sustainable National CBFM Programs in the Pacific (Pathways-2) (2021–2025), is a project that was based in VFD and funded by the Australian Government through ACIAR that integrated a gender equality, disability, and socially inclusive approach to implementation and research. The project supported a dedicated gender officer within VFD, strengthened communications highlighting VFDs activities in the gender space, and worked to enhance participation of women and people with disabilities in coastal fisheries. It also facilitated access to tertiary education, such as master's programmes, for both women and men VFD staff. Key partners included Wan Smolbag and Vanua Tai.

The **Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership Programme (PEUMP)** (2019 – ongoing), a programme funded by the European Union and Sweden, aims to provide direct assistance to support regional and national level activities across the Pacific Island region, including in Vanuatu.⁹⁵ Project priorities include mainstreaming a gender, social inclusion, and human-rights based approach in the fisheries sector, such as through the collection of gender-disaggregated data, capacity building, empowering women in decision-making for coastal fisheries, and expanding equal employment opportunities for women in the tuna industry.⁹⁶ At the EU–Pacific Ocean Dialogue in Suva in late 2025, the EU Ambassador to the Pacific, H.E. Barbara Plinkert, highlighted the EU's intention to launch Phase II of PEUMP in 2026 to “build on lessons learnt, deepen cooperation, and drive sustainable ocean governance.”⁹⁷

Our Fish Our Future (2021–2026), was a USAID funded regional initiative aimed at tackling IUU fishing and strengthening coastal fisheries across six Pacific Island countries, including Vanuatu. The programme collaborated with Peace Corps to run gender training for fisheries officers in VFD. It was terminated in 2025.⁹⁸ In its reported results, Our Fish Our Future indicated having trained 300 people in the integration of a gender perspective in fisheries across the six project countries.⁹⁸

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Women fishing with bamboo rods in Aniwa (Tafea Province) and Torba Province. Photographs by Joelle Albert (left) and Aymeric Desurmont (right).



Women vendors in Vanuatu—such as here in Sara village (Sanma Province)—play a central role in local fisheries economies, acting as key intermediaries between fishers and consumers and managing the flow of income from aquatic food sales. Photographs by Dirk Steenberg.



Post-workshop breakout discussion following the theatre performance “Twist mo Spin” (2019) by the Wan Smolbag Theatre group, which used participatory drama to explore community-based fisheries management. The performance was followed by actor-facilitated discussions on sustainable fisheries practices. This photo shows one of the breakout groups. Photograph by Dirk Steenberg.

Endnotes

- a Equivalent to local artisanal production for Sea Around Us data (below)
- b To avoid inaccuracies in converting currencies for different commodity types across different years, we have elected to present the values in the currency which they were reported.
- c In November 2025, the mid-market rate of 1 VT = 0.0081 or 1 USD = 122.36 Ni-Vanuatu Vatu
- d Catch estimates across fleets and gears for all tuna species within Vanuatu's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) have varied widely, ranging from 2,431 tonnes in 2021 to 9,853 tonnes in 2016, with an annual average of 7,156 tonnes between 2012 and 2022. The increase in estimates between 2021 and 2022 specifically is partly linked to the start of licensing and processing operations by SinoVan Fisheries Limited.
- e Marine fisheries statistics are derived from catch reconstruction under the Sea Around Us - <http://www.seaaroundus.org/data/#/eez>. The approach utilized builds on national statistics and accounts for discards as well as sectoral catch data that often is not included in official datasets (e.g., artisanal or recreational catches). The Sea Around Us data is also utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project. Sea Around Us data are distinguished according to the following categories: large-scale (i.e., industrial) and small-scale (i.e., artisanal, subsistence and recreational) fisheries catches. Recreational catches were not considered here.(4)
- f "Marine subsistence" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by the subsistence sector. This consists of fisheries conducted by women and/or non-commercial fishers for consumption by one's family, and where applicable, the fraction of the commercial catch that is given to crew or the community (mainly from small-scale fisheries).(4, 6)
- g "Marine commercial" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by commercial fisheries. These are fisheries whose landed catch is sold commercially (as opposed to being consumed and/or given away to the crew) and encompass both the industrial (large-scale) and artisanal (small-scale) sectors.(4, 6)
- h The term "apparent" refers to the average food available for consumption, which for several reasons (for example, waste at the household level), is not equal to average food intake or average food consumption. The amount is calculated as production + imports - exports - non-food uses, +/- stocks variations and divided by number of people partaking of it.
- i 2022 Vanuatu National Agricultural Census in (12)
- j The Illuminating Hidden Harvests project estimates are utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project (visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to access all the fact sheets).
- k Estimates calculated based on labour force surveys and Income Expenditure Surveys as part of the Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) project.(13)
- l Subsistence fisheries activities, also referred to as "working for own consumption", are defined by the IHH as activities that individuals of any sex and age carried out at least once over the last 12 months to produce and process fish for their own final use, with no transaction occurring in the marketplace. By definition, they are considered here as small-scale fisheries. (Table 2.1.(14))
- m Small Scale Fisheries (SSF) are distinguished from Large Scale Fisheries (LSF) according to a characterisation matrix that distinguishes between fisheries according to gear use, vessel characteristics, fishing operations, types of storage and preservation of catch, employment/labour, and use of catch. The characterisation matrix allows for a standardised approach to classify and characterize fisheries at the global and regional level, allowing for high levels of variation between fisheries. SSF generally includes low-technology, low-capital, labour-intensive fishing practices. Often, the term artisanal is used to refer to small-scale fisheries. In the context of the IHH work, the term small-scale fisheries refers to the whole value chain of pre-harvest, harvesting and post-harvest activities, including subsistence fisheries and excluding recreational fisheries.(15)
- n According to Illuminating Hidden Harvests project estimates, 109,903 people belong to a household where at least one person engages in fisheries or in subsistence fishing.
- o The Illuminating Hidden Harvests project estimates are utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project (visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to access all the fact sheets).
- p Gleaning is a fishing method typically done by hand or using simple gears and used in shallow coastal waters or habitats exposed during low tide, as well as estuarine and freshwater environments.
- q This sub-section was crafted in part from documented examples in the literature and augmented with co-author contributions.
- r Co-author contribution.
- s Co-author contribution.
- t While the matrilineal inheritance systems can confer greater gender equity, this is not always the case as the influence of Kastom, religious systems, and colonial legacies has diluted women's historical roles. Women's authority in matrilineal systems may now be largely symbolic, though higher social respect and status are still more commonly accorded to women in these settings. Based on co-author observations.
- u The proportion of the population aged 15 and older that is economically active.
- v The rate of hardship for Vanuatu is defined as the proportion of individuals living below the "National Poverty Line" based on the national cost of basic needs, which includes food and non-food needs. (29)
- w Despite these challenges, note that inequality levels in Vanuatu remain relatively low compared to other Pacific and East Asia countries.
- x Co-author contribution.
- y Co-author contribution.
- z Note that teachers in Vanuatu have engaged in intermittent strikes since 2024 over unresolved back-pay disputes, and despite more than a year of negotiations with the government, no agreement has been reached. (38)
- aa Co-author contribution.
- ab Co-author contribution.
- ac AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- ad Although Vanuatu also had examples of lineage being passed through the mother but land being handed down patrilineally. (41)
- ae AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- af Co-author contribution.
- ag AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- ah Domestic violence: Violence—physical, sexual, psychological, or economic—occurring within the family or intimate partner context, including between current or former partners and household members. Gender based violence (GBV): Violence directed at a person because of their gender or that disproportionately affects a particular gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm in public or private settings. Family protection laws in the Pacific often cover only domestic violence cases, which are mostly gender-based, but survivors of GBV outside domestic spheres are less well protected via general criminal laws (e.g. Penal Code).
- ai AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- aj AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- ak AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)

- al AusAid (2008) Vanuatu country supplement in (40)
- am Supplementary material is available at <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets>, where you can read summaries of key conventions and policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- an The Optional Protocol to CEDAW (OP-CEDAW) is an international treaty that creates additional complaint and inquiry mechanisms for CEDAW, allowing individuals to report violations and enabling the CEDAW Committee to investigate grave and systematic violations of women's rights by state parties.(59)
- ao The revitalised PLGED was endorsed at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands. It considers current regional and national contexts and priorities including the thematic areas of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.
- ap Specifically, the SAMOA Pathway outlines recommendations to eliminate discrimination, enhance economic empowerment, end violence, ensure participation in decision-making, and protect sexual and reproductive health rights.
- aq Supplementary material is available at <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets>, where you can read summaries of key conventions and policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- ar Supplementary material is available at <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets>, where you can read summaries of key conventions and policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- as Supplementary material is available at <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets>, where you can read summaries of key conventions and policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- at Sourced from the databases FAO LEX, ECO LEX, and SSF LEX. Fisheries governance documents include fisheries policies, laws, acts, plans, strategies, and regulations. A database of all reviewed governance documents can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15098509>.
- au Co-author contribution.
- av Co-authors contribution.
- aw Co-author contribution.
- ax Co-author contribution.
- ay Supplementary material is available at <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets>, where you can read how ODA allocations were derived.
- az Different from OECD standard methods, this is measured in disbursements from DAC countries (including EU Institutions) to recipient countries. This captures the amount of money given, as opposed to the amount of money committed. Original data was downloaded on 17th June 2024.
- ba Section information contributed by co-author.

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