



Key Findings

Maritime Security and the Environment: How Women Protect and Defend Southeast Asia's Future Prosperity June 30, 2021

The Pacific Forum, in partnership with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, co-hosted a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) webinar titled, *Maritime Security and the Environment: How Women Protect and Defend Southeast Asia's Future Prosperity*, on June 30, 2021, over the Zoom platform. The public virtual event featured panelists Ms. Rili Djohani (Coral Triangle Center) and Dr. Aazani Mujahid (University of Malaysia Sarawak), discussant Dr. Asyura Saleh (Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies), and moderator Ms. Whitney Yadao-Evans (Conservation International), who addressed how gender factors into maritime and resource management issues in one of the world's fastest-growing subregions in the world. The webinar was attended by 70 viewers from the United States, Southeast Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific.

The key findings of this webinar are discussed below.

Conserving Southeast Asia's Marine Biodiversity

Southeast Asia is home to some of the richest and most diverse marine life in the world. The Coral Triangle region, which includes the seas around Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste is the epicenter of this biodiversity. The region is home to more than 550 unique species of coral and thousands of species of reef fish, many of which are endemic to the area. It serves as a breeding ground for cetaceans and other marine megafauna. The Coral Triangle provides food security to over 130 million people living in and around the region. Despite its importance, the Coral Triangle is threatened by climate change, destructive fishing practices, and marine debris.

Conserving the region's marine biodiversity is of global importance, and there are regional and international efforts designed to do so. The Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security (CTI-CFF) addresses the threats faced by the marine environment and coastal communities of the Coral Triangle. The Coral Triangle Center (CTC) focuses its efforts on engaging grassroots constituencies to build local capacity for long-term management of the Coral Triangle. Both organizations directly engage with women and youth. CTI-CFF established the Women Leaders Forum (WLF) to elevate women in leadership roles in marine conservation and build the capacity of local women to engage in marine conservation and economic activities. The CTC's involvement on the ground in local coastal communities provides insight into the roles of women and how they engage with the marine environment.

Maritime Insecurity is Rooted in Gender Disparities

In recent years, there has been an increase in the awareness of the links between the health of the maritime environment and national security. Marine degradation exacerbates instability both at sea and on land. Gender disparities are also situated within other social issues, including but not limited to migration status and socioeconomic status. COVID-19 exacerbates existing gender disparities in the maritime environment. Men forced to leave their jobs in big cities returned home and displaced women in the fishing industry, leading to a rise in Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing and other maritime crimes.

Women play a significant role in marine economic activities, but their labor is economically devalued. Consequently, they lack the same access to resources and benefits and are excluded from decision-making processes compared to men. A survey by Dr. Mujahid in the coastal communities of Sarawak, Malaysia found that women are key players in fisheries, but their perspectives are overlooked. The same survey also found that women fishers are less educated than their male counterparts which prevents them from engaging in the formal economy or enforcing their rights as workers. Women lack information on their rights in the workplace relating to working hours, conditions, and pay. Having had little formal education reduces their access to new skills and technologies that could make their work safer and enable them to create products of higher value. Many women do not have the support of their families to obtain formal educations and engage in work outside of the fishing industry.

Fishing communities tend to be male-dominated, and men are considered to be leaders and occupy higher status in society. Cultural attitudes toward men reinforce gender stereotypes in society and economic activities. Some women internalize this view and do not see a problem with the continued propagation of these norms because they play the roles that are expected to play. National legislation does not support an equal role for women in maritime industries.

The Contributions of Women to Marine Conservation and the Marine Value Chain are Systemically Ignored

Women are key players in marine conservation and the marine value chain but their contributions to both are regularly and systemically overlooked in both policies and local practices. Women who are involved in fisheries tend to be categorized as solely occupying ‘helping’ roles such as net sewing and cleaning, while men are more heavily involved in hard labor and offshore fishing. Nevertheless, women are deeply involved in value-adding activities. In coastal communities in the Coral Triangle, more than 50% of women are engaged in fishing and around 80% are involved in some form of processing fishery products. Many women sell fish as a secondary source of income. In conservation initiatives, women play a crucial role in monitoring efforts and the sustainability of solutions.

Empowering Women in Maritime Conservation and Economic Activities

Recognizing and valuing women’s involvement in marine conservation and economic activities is closely linked to issues of human rights, worker’s rights, and societal inequalities. In the maritime environment, women bring unique talents and perspectives that enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts and the profitability of economic activities. Empowering women in these contexts is crucial to their continued success. The efforts of the CTI-CFF and the CTC have made great strides in shifting the paradigm of a male-dominated maritime environment towards one that is more inclusive and sustainable. At an organizational level, CTI-CFF mainstreamed gender equality and social inclusion into its structure and mission. Members believe that when understood and operationalized within a specific cultural and social context, it can lead to change. The WLF established a peer-learning network for 200 women in leadership positions and developed a competency model to elevate women’s leadership in marine resource conservation that is available to the public. Capacity-building efforts targeted at women in coastal communities provide skills training for women to increase their earning capacity by 80%. This increased

their economic power and decision-making capacity, elevated their statuses in the village and provided openings for them to engage in community-level leadership, and allowed them to pay for their children to attend college.

Looking Forward

Existing gender disparities in marine conservation and economic activities must be addressed through a paradigm shift. It is important to further institutionalize a gendered lens on leadership training and coastal management. Operationalizing women's empowerment through conservation and economic activities provides avenues for women to work within male-dominated societies. It also boosts their status and acceptance within communities and recognizes the value and the roles they play in fisheries. Crucially, it helps to address gender disparities by empowering women to recognize their own importance. Men must be involved on a bigger scale to enable and support the expansion of the roles of women. More men, superiors and peers, need to be engaged in the gender-mainstreaming process. Empowering youth is also important for creating the next generation of marine conservation and economic leaders.

This document was prepared by Lily Schlieman, Maryruth Belsey-Priebe and Dr. Maria Tanyag. For more information, please contact Ariel Stenek (ariel@pacforum.org). These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants. The speakers have approved this summation of their presentation. This event was funded [in part] by the United States Department of Defense. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of Defense.