

## Challenging conservation not to leave women behind

By Robyn James, 8th March 2021

Marilyn Gede has spent the last six decades surrounded by the South Pacific, but she had never seen the wonders of what lay underwater. She lives in a community that is responsible for managing the Arnavon Islands, the Solomon Island's first national park. These four tiny islands are biodiversity hotspots, home to vibrant coral reefs and the largest hawksbill sea turtle rookery in the South Pacific. But until recently, Marilyn and many women like her were largely excluded from decisions about how the islands were researched and managed.

Over the last few decades international scientists have travelled to the Arnavons to study sea turtle migration and coral reef ecology, yet local women, like Marilyn, were not involved. They were rarely able to share their knowledge, had never snorkelled on a coral reef, seen a turtle lay her eggs or witnessed hatchlings emerge from nests on the islands their communities were protecting.



Left: Women challenging conservation norms: Marilyn Gede. Photo: Kate Cranney/TNC. Right: Women leading conservation through groups like KAWAKI. Photo: David Jaclin/TNC

Marilyn's situation is not unique. Our review of more than 230 peer-reviewed articles confirmed an uncomfortable truth: women everywhere are excluded from decisions about conservation and natural resources. Gender discrimination is systemic and consistent, from small and remote communities in places such as the Solomon Islands, to large conservation and natural resource management organizations, where women are still underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions.

In the Arnavon Islands, I have been privileged to work closely with Marilyn and many others to flip this dynamic. Led by Marilyn and her peers, we founded KAWAKI: a conservation organization led by women that would enable them to lead decisions about their land and sea. But with increasing power and respect came increased resistance and discrimination. As Marilyn's agency grew, some men felt threatened and attempted to limit her access to the national park. She has also been accused of sorcery—a dangerous allegation in her culture—to try and minimise her influence in her community. This is a high price to pay for a rightful say in how your resources are managed.



KAWAKI women from the three communities surrounding Arnavon Community Marine Park celebrate their new conservation group. Photo: TNC

Our literature review unfortunately confirms this paradox: women's empowerment can be wielded as a threat against them. Existing gender roles and dynamics continue to limit women over the course of their lifetimes—in other words, there's no single barrier to overcome.

These gender imbalances are pervasive in the communities where we work and within conservation organizations. For example, in conservation and science organisations, women often occupy interpretive, communicative, and administrative roles (with a focus on so-called soft skills), and men are over-represented in positions that are more leadership-oriented and risk-taking or involve field research). I have been discouraged from applying for leadership positions in conservation organizations because management felt that a woman would be unsafe traveling in remote locations or it was implied that my parenting responsibilities would make it difficult for me to meet travel or fieldwork requirements.



Arnavon Community Marine Park, Solomon Islands. Photos: Robert Taupongi

In stark contrast, my male counterparts were encouraged into leadership and research positions, even though they had children of similar age or less experience.

Research also confirms that men benefit from and have more opportunities to participate in conservation than women, and while these findings are well-known, there is limited commitment to addressing this gender gap. There is an entrenched perception that men should be the decision makers and leaders in most contexts, both within conservation management organizations and in the communities where they work.



Left: KAWAKI members release a sea turtle, with a satellite tag, into the ocean in the Arnavon Islands. Photo: Tim Calver/TNC. Right: A more inclusive approach to conservation in Solomon Islands with women of KAWAKI conservation group and rangers working together to manage the park and promote awareness in their communities. Photo: TNC

We need to continually challenge the assumption that leadership positions are best held by men. Without women in scientific research and leadership or decision-making positions, gender-based discrimination and discrepancies are rarely even recognized as a problem to be solved. Less than 30% of the 230 articles analysed in this review were authored by men.

The theme for International Women's Day 2021 is Choose to Challenge. Women like Marilyn who challenge patriarchal systems and sacrifice their personal safety to promote sustainable resource management for their communities deserve better. It is our responsibility to keep challenging systems and structures that discourage or even prevent women from being heard, and we need to see accelerated, increased, and sustained action from our male peers.



Left: The women of KAWAKI, Solomon Islands lead a presentation at a conservation event in Australia. Photo: Ciara Denham. Right: Marilyn's home village of Kia, Solomon Islands. Photo: Djuna Ivereigh/TNC

I will never forget the moment when Marilyn saw the underwater world she was protecting for the first time. Her excitement after submerging her masked face underwater is something I will never forget. Today, through many ups and downs, she is creating a legacy of strong and vibrant network of women who are receiving international recognition, supported by community leaders and continuing to challenge and change conservation both in in Solomon Islands and globally.

Banner title photo: Arnavon Community Marine Park, Solomon Islands. Photo: TNC

The article [Conservation and natural resource management: where are all the women?](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



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