

# **Markets and Women's Market Trading in the Pacific Islands: An Overview of Social Contexts and Ongoing Challenges**

Susan Dewey  
*University of Wyoming*

---

## **Abstract**

This article juxtaposes a comprehensive overview of interdisciplinary research on Pacific Island market traders, the vast majority of whom are women, with ethnographic research carried out by the author in Fiji's Suva Municipal Market. Markets, whether centrally organized by a government body or ad hoc in nature, provide a critical source of income for women throughout the Pacific Island region. Yet like their counterparts in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, governments and policymakers alike routinely ignore the substantial contributions women market traders make to local and national economies. Information presented provides a general overview of the nature and extent of market trade in the Pacific Islands, including common varieties of markets and their structures and commodity chains. Analysis that follows covers the social context of market trade in the Pacific, including the historical roles of markets, the impact of dramatic shifts from customary to capitalist exchange, and the myriad of social roles filled by markets. Challenges faced by Pacific women traders are also discussed, particularly infrastructural and organizational obstacles, risks to health and safety, demands from kin for financial or in-kind support, and cultural beliefs about gender. The article concludes with research-based recommendations for improving markets, including the recognition of markets as significant sources of revenue, acknowledging women market traders as businesspeople, investment in infrastructural improvements to markets, and more active promotion of agricultural production and marketing by Pacific Island governments.

---

## **Key words**

Produce market traders, women, Pacific Islands, feminized labor

## Introduction

Visitors to almost any Pacific Island marketplace are likely to be struck by the vibrant energy that fills the air as traders, the vast majority of whom are women, carry out the life-sustaining business of selling produce and other consumable commodities to their customers, who are also mostly women. In these economic transactions between women, the casual observer might take note of the absence of scales in favor of “heaps”, small portions of fruits or vegetables piled on plastic plates for sale, and the sheer number of women traders who crowd into a small space to sell produce which is often indistinguishable from that of their competitors. Yet as bananas bearing the marks of the machetes that struck them from backyard trees and cassava still covered in the earth from which it was harvested trade hands for cash, something critical is taking place.

Pacific Island market traders directly and indirectly support thousands of people through their work supplying fresh foods to those who cannot or do not wish to cultivate crops for their own consumption. Food costs are high throughout the Pacific due to a dependency upon (or, in some cases, preferences for) imported processed foods, a lack of arable land, and small population sizes. Markets are one of the few venues where individuals can purchase affordable, fresh, and healthy foods, and markets are accordingly patronized by people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Women’s market trade is the sole source of income in many rural areas, where the vast majorities of people are engaged in subsistence lifestyles and yet increasingly require cash in order to pay children’s school fees and to purchase consumer goods associated with urban lifestyles.

Pacific Island markets are sustained by a complex and female-dominated infrastructural system that involves rural producers, wholesalers, intermediary sellers who purchase from wholesalers and sell in the market, and both casual weekend and permanent daily traders. Levels of complexity and infrastructure vary considerably by island and are determined at least in part by population size, so that the population-dense island nations of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands feature elaborate production and distribution systems that span diverse ecosystems and populations. Such high population densities in these countries

means that there are also many different types of markets, ranging from large-scale permanent structures, which are regulated by municipal authorities, to temporary roadside sales by farmers with surplus produce that they wish to exchange for cash. Islands with very small populations, such as Niue or Tokelau, feature much smaller-scale marketing activities with little administrative involvement.

This article juxtaposes knowledge related to markets in the Pacific Island region with my own ethnographic research in the Suva Municipal Market. Uniting these diverse findings, which draw upon research in Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tahiti, Territory of Wallis and Futuna, and Tonga, reveals a number of commonalities shared by market traders across the Pacific. From these sources, it is clear that the vast majority of market traders are women, many of whom work long hours in conditions that they describe as inadequate, unsanitary, hazardous, and even unsafe.

The available literature on this subject also indicates that income earned from market trading supports countless households throughout the islands, paying school fees and other expenses and, above all, keeping families out of poverty. Men, particularly traders' husbands and other male family members, assist women traders in growing crops, but pan-Pacific cultural norms largely position market trading as a feminized form of income generation. Female traders with whom I conducted research in the Suva Municipal Market almost universally explained the predominance of women in market trading activities by stating some variation of the phrase "men feel shame to come to market" due to the low status and public nature of the work.

Women market traders' working conditions closely correspond with those of feminized labor, which is characterized by "temporality, comparatively low wages, and reduced union membership" (Fernandez Kelly & Sassen, 1995, p. 99). Women throughout the world are socialized to provide the vast majority of unpaid labor, including child care, food preparation, and other care-giving work. The incompatibility of such responsibilities with higher-paid and more secure jobs means that women are much more likely than men to find themselves doing unpaid work in the home instead of earning a salary through formal employment. As evidence presented throughout this article will clearly illustrate, women market traders throughout the Pacific Island region experience a number

of common hardships and constraints that stem, in part, from the feminized nature of their work.

### Research Design and Key Findings

The Suva Municipal Market is located in Suva, Fiji's capital city and the second largest urban area in the Pacific Island region. Most traders in this market, which is Fiji's largest and most ethnically diverse venue for the exchange of agricultural products and cash, are women. About half of these traders grow their own produce for sale, while the other half comprise intermediary traders who resell agricultural products that they buy from wholesalers, some of whom are farmers, who arrive in the pre-dawn hours with trucks full of produce that they sell at lower rates. All traders pay a daily stall fee to an administrator, known as the Market Master, who is an employee of the Suva City Council. The market is open every day except Sunday, and the numbers of traders can reach several thousand on Fridays and Saturdays, when traders from remote rural areas arrive to sell outside the market.

The market opens at 6am, just before sunrise, and closes approximately twelve hours later. In order to begin trading in the market, one must approach the Market Master, who is employed by the Suva City Council, which administers the market. The Council, as this local government entity is typically called, generates considerable revenue from the stall fees paid by market traders, which comprise the capital city's second highest source of revenue after taxes (Suva City Council, 2008). Stall fees currently stand at \$2.80 per day for traders who sell inside the market structure, \$3.30 per day for traders who sell outside the market, \$3.30 per day for seafood sellers, \$3.60 for dry goods, \$3.30 per day for juice sellers, and \$20.25 per week for bean or sweet cart vendors, \$56.25 for juice mall proprietors (Suva City Council, 2010).

Market traders display their produce on concrete tables provided by the Suva City Council inside the market. There is very little variation in the price of items throughout the market, and the vast majority of fruits and vegetables are sold by "heap" (*ibinibini*, in Fijian), which consists of the number of the particular fruit or vegetable that can be conveniently piled onto a small plastic plate. A "heap" of papaya, for instance, usually includes four medium-size fruits, while a "heap" of green

chili peppers might include as many as fifty small peppers. Items sold in the market correspond in some respects with traders' ethno-linguistic identity. The upstairs floor of the Suva Municipal Market is reserved for spices and dry goods, including yaqona (*piper methysicum*), a root crop indispensable for indigenous Fijian ceremonies but also consumed recreationally by many Fiji residents. Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians sell yaqona in equal numbers, and men predominate due to the much more lucrative nature of these sales. Indo-Fijians predominate in spice sales, whereas indigenous Fijians form an almost exclusive majority in the adjacent fish market and in weekend sales of produce on the market verandah.

The market's ground floor features an array of fresh produce sold by indigenous Fijian, Indo-Fijian and Chinese traders in numbers that almost identically correspond with the percentages of these groups represented in Suva's population. Items for sale vary somewhat by season, but typically feature staples such as papaya, banana, bok choy, lettuce, cassava, dalo (taro), citrus fruits, chili, plantain, pumpkin, and yam. Indo-Fijian traders are more likely than others to sell ingredients typically featured in Indo-Fijian cuisine, such as cilantro (coriander), eggplant, garlic and onions, whereas indigenous Fijians predominate in the sale of yam, dalo, and cassava, which form the basis of most indigenous Fijian meals.

The author chose the Suva Municipal Market as her field site because it is one of the few sites in Fiji's ethnically heterogeneous capital in which members of different ethno-linguistic communities regularly interact with one another. This is particularly significant given the fact that in less than two decades, Fiji has experienced four coups in which ethnicity has intersected with discourses surrounding ethno-cultural differences between the country's two majority ethno-linguistic groups, who are most often described as indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians despite the fact that doing so belies the cultural diversity in these groups. Indigenous Fijians constitute just over half of Fiji's population, while approximately 40 percent of Fiji residents self-identify as Indo-Fijian, many of whom are descendants of contract labor migrants who came to Fiji to work in British colonial sugar cane plantations. Traders from both of these ethno-linguistic communities regularly interact with one another, with wholesalers, and with customers in the market, and have in-

creasingly been joined by Chinese migrant traders, quite a few of whom have learned Fijian or Fiji Hindi in order to communicate with wholesalers.

The author conducted three months of preliminary ethnographic research with women market traders in Fiji from May to August, 2011 in Suva and surrounding rural areas. This is part of a much larger and longer-term project that examines exchange-related decision-making among traders in the wake of serious food security issues related to socioeconomic crises and climate change. The research methodology comprised four main tasks: [1] the administration of nearly two hundred surveys designed to produce quantitative data on age, sex, mother tongue, place of residence, educational background, family dynamics, length of time trading, goods for sale, income, and expenditures; [2] fifty in-depth, semi-structured interviews which elicited traders' decision-making processes, networks of support, and perceptions of their work; [3] approximately one hundred hours of participant observation in the Suva Municipal Market, during which the author sat with traders observing their interactions with customers and other work activities while assisting with minor tasks such as peeling or cleaning vegetables; [4] collection and textual analysis of over 250 documents related to market trade, including colonial administrative records held at the National Archives of Fiji, and contemporary administrative records from the Suva City Council and the offices of *The Fiji Times*, Fiji's most widely read newspaper.

Quantitative data collected from the survey revealed that there are significant differences between those who sell goods from tables allocated to them from inside the market and those who lay their produce on the ground on the concrete verandah or unpaved area outside the market on Fridays and Saturdays. Approximately half of all traders are in their mid-forties and have an average of two school-age children regardless of where they sell their produce, but similarities between these two populations stop there. Individuals who sell inside the market typically live closer to Suva, with an average commute time of just over thirty minutes, have more education and more years of trading experience, with approximately thirty percent of all traders working in the market for between ten and fifteen years. Twenty percent of those who sell inside have been trading at the Suva Market for more than fifteen years.

Approximately half of the inside traders report daily incomes of between fifty and one hundred Fiji dollars, with this rising up to two hundred on Fridays and Saturdays.

Traders who sell outside typically travel much longer distances, with just under half spending between one and a half and two hours to reach the market. Those who sell outside are also less formally educated, with a full thirty-five percent having completed no more than the U.S. equivalent of seventh grade. Outside traders have far fewer years of experience with market trading, with thirty percent selling between six to nine years, and one quarter selling for four or five years. Just under sixty percent of outside traders earn between one and two hundred dollars on Fridays and Saturdays, the main days that they attend market from their rural homes.

Key findings from this research indicate that fees paid by market traders constitute Suva's second largest source of revenue after taxes, meaning that the women of the Suva Municipal Market not only feed most of the citizens of Fiji's capital, but also significantly subsidize their urban amenities as well. The result is a curious paradox in which traders, the vast majority of whom live either in rural or peri-urban areas at least an hour's journey away from the capital, provide support for a city in which they do not have the privilege of residence. In return for these fees, they work in what they routinely describe as substandard conditions that expose them to the elements and deprive them of access to hygienic toilet facilities. The situation is worse still for rural traders who travel very long distances to sell outside the market on weekends, where they have no protection from harsh sun or rain.

These harsh working conditions have serious implications for women traders' health and well-being. Many of the traders the author interacted with during the course of the research described feeling enormous amounts of stress due to the pressure to generate what in many cases was their family's sole source of cash income. While traders from rural areas typically grow their own food and have limited expenses beyond school fees and food items such as sugar or flour, they also have no other options that would allow them to generate cash. The high costs and infrequent nature of transport from rural areas to Suva means that many rural traders arrive at the market in the pre-dawn hours of morning or very late at night, which forces them to wait outside the market

until it opens at 6am. This exposes them to sexual harassment by intoxicated men who wander around the market, which is centrally located and near many bars and nightclubs. When spending the night with traders in the market, this author often felt unsafe and vulnerable as intoxicated men stumbled amongst sleeping women traders, who set up makeshift shelters using tarpaulins and lay sheets on the market's concrete verandah, exposed both to the elements and to harassment by these interlopers.

Interviews with traders revealed that men dominate the leadership of the two market traders' associations, one which caters to rural traders who grow their own produce and the other to peri-urban or urban traders who resell produce that they buy from wholesalers. Women constitute the vast majority of market traders, and yet this consolidation of leadership amongst the minority of male traders means that particular concerns, such as sexual harassment of women sleeping outside the market prior to its opening, do not receive the attention they deserve. As the following discussion of the social contexts that inform market trade throughout the Pacific will illustrate, these issues and concerns are by no means unique to Fiji.

### **Pacific Island Markets and Market Traders: An Overview**

Pacific Island women market traders share a number of striking similarities with their Asian and Sub-Saharan African counterparts, particularly in their innovative use of strategies to support themselves and their children in economically unstable circumstances. Markets, whether centrally organized by a government body or ad hoc in nature, provide a critical source of income for women throughout the Pacific Island region. Yet like their counterparts in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, governments and policymakers alike routinely ignore the substantial contributions women market traders make to local and national economies. Women market traders connect urban consumers with rural producers, pay significant fees that subsidize municipal town planning ventures, and, of course, provide economic support to countless households and communities throughout the Pacific.

Although the Pacific Islands are home to myriad forms of trade, a review of the literature allows for the identification of seven market va-



rieties throughout the diverse cultural contexts of the region. These include municipal market, roadside markets, private, individual, or home-based markets, periodic markets, barter markets, flea markets, and handicraft markets. Women predominate in all of these markets, although male participation is not entirely abnormal. Municipal markets are organized by local government authorities and require traders to pay stall fees (Lateef, 1994), which in some towns and cities, such as Suva, Fiji's capital, constitute the second largest source of revenue after taxes. Roadside markets are typically organized on an ad hoc basis by farmers or their intermediaries, and may or may not be legal and subject to regulation by local authorities (Anderson, 2008). Private, individual or home-based markets are organized by individuals with extra produce or other goods to sell, and may be ad hoc or semi-permanent in nature (van der Grijp, 2003). In some cases, these may be as simple as produce displayed for sale on a mat in front of a private home.

Periodic markets take place on an as-needed or ceremonial basis and may or may not be regulated by local government authorities (Gewertz, 1977; Lederman, 2009). Barter markets feature the exchange of produce or other goods without cash, and have been decreasing in number for quite some time (Gewertz, 1978) due to the increasingly prevalent use of cash even in remote rural areas. Flea markets sell used, discarded, or scavenged items, some of which may be sent by local residents' relatives living in other countries with the explicit purpose of resale (Besnier, 2004; Brown & Connell, 1993). Handicraft markets cater primarily to tourists and sometimes to local urban residents interested in goods manufactured by those with rural ties (Connelly-Kirch, 1982).

Pacific Island markets vary enormously both in their levels of complexity and the geographical extent from which their produce arrives. Some markets unite diverse ecosystems with produce arriving from great distances and therefore play a critical role in linking rural producers and urban consumers, while others are highly localized. Urban markets across the Pacific face unique hardships due to their location in fragile ecological coastal zones, subjection to pollution from exhaust, sewage, noise, and dumping, and the breakdown between local and national economies due to remittances, aid, and the presence of profitable corporations which may not always benefit or be accountable to the general public (Connell & Lea, 2007). Markets can be dominated by farmers

who have grown the produce for sale (Anderson, 2010) while some are largely operated by brokers selling produce purchased from farmers or wholesalers (Singh, 1996), and others are dominated by some combination of both.

Markets throughout the Pacific are highly feminized, with the percentage of women traders ranging from over half to a vast majority. There is some indication that this has not always been the case, as early colonial photographic evidence suggests that the first traders to sell produce in towns and other settled areas were men. Early scholarship on market trade confirms that this seems to have been the case until the 1950s (Jackson, 1976). Markets have the potential to play a role in transforming gender relations, as the introduction of a cash economy can either reduce women's status (Feinberg, 1986) or dramatically democratize gender relations (Mosko, 1999).

The potential for revenue generation and amounts earned by women market traders varies from quite lucrative (Anderson, 2008), to above the national minimum wage (Lateef, 1994), to supplementary to other wages or income generation activities. Some studies suggest that market trading and other informal economic activity is more lucrative than formal sector work for women despite the lower level of prestige accorded to it (Umezaki & Ohtsuka, 2003). Access to markets can be a highly coveted prospect due to their potential for cash generation, particularly by groups with limited access to cash or transportation. This can result in a situation in which groups without access to markets may envision themselves in a situation of relative deprivation with respect to those who do have such access (Hirsch, 1994).

One study in Fiji's main market found that market traders provide critical contributions to family income. This study also noted significant differences between Fiji's two major ethno-linguistic groups, with Fijian-speaking women traders more experienced with trade, supporting larger households, and with higher levels of education than their Hindi-speaking counterparts (Lateef, 1994). The majority of Papua New Guinea market traders similarly support their families, often through the creation and utilization of extensive social and economic networks that connect seemingly isolated rural areas with urban markets (Epstein, 1982).

The origin of produce markets organized and administered by a cen-

tral authority with regulatory powers dates to the advent of the colonial period throughout the Pacific Islands (Connell & Lea, 2007). Market trading is frequently embedded in broader cultural meanings about exchange (Munn, 1992) and has historically served an important function in regulating relationships between groups, including in reducing levels of hostility. In the Solomon Islands, for instance, feuding groups would suspend their hostilities on market days in order to facilitate trade. It has been argued that hostility between different groups historically allowed Solomon Islanders to specialize in particular forms of production in order to engage in trade on appointed market days (Ross, 1978).

Women have historically played a significant role in these exchange transactions, a fact that was overlooked until feminist anthropologists began to document Pacific women's contributions to trade (Gewertz, 1978; Ross, 1978). Particularly in Papua New Guinea, markets have long taken place between two ethno-linguistic groups, providing a critical space for the exchange of goods, information, and beliefs (Keil, 1977). According to at least one study, some markets served as sites where marriage and other important life rites were arranged until at least the late 1950s (Epstein, 1961).

### **Social Context of Women's Market Trade in the Pacific**

Market trade takes place in cultural contexts that place a high value on reciprocity and fulfilling obligations to kin. This presents dilemmas for traders, who must reconcile their individual desires for income generation with their customary responsibilities. In this respect, urban traders may have a comparative advantage over rural traders due to the reduced pressure to maintain close ties, some of which are economic, with kin (van der Grijp, 2003). In many Pacific Island countries, markets were the first places where produce and other goods were exchanged for cash, particularly since most markets serve to unite rural producers with urbanites who have more ready access to wage labor. At least some rural residents in Papua New Guinea, for instance, have been shown to keenly anticipate the construction of a road that would link their village with the capital city, thus providing cash income to acquire the kind of lifestyle they believe that most urbanites maintain (Hirsch, 1994).

There is varied and somewhat contradictory evidence regarding the

impact of cash earned from market trade upon rural producers who previously practiced subsistence agriculture. Some studies have argued that the introduction of a cash economy dramatically alters the gendered division of labor and related sex roles, with greater prestige attached to cash generation (Feinberg, 1986; Mosko, 1999), while others contend that cash-for-goods exchanges are simply incorporated into previously subsistence-based groups' existing belief systems by utilizing multiple strategies to make sense of the use of cash (Sykes, 2007).

Markets are both products of and embedded in the social context in which they take place, making them social gathering sites as much as they are locations of economic exchange. Consumers value the opportunity to interact with others in the public atmosphere of the marketplace (Besnier, 2011; Pollock, 1988), and this is likely true of at least some traders as well. Individual market traders are keenly aware of their ties to local social networks and connections to broader global supply chains through the production of agricultural goods, and frequently seek out these networks in their trading strategies (Benediktsson, 2002).

The networks established by women Pacific Island traders extend far and wide. The Suva Municipal Market, for instance, features a gathering of individuals from all of Fiji's ethno-linguistic groups, and links rural producers, urban consumers, and peri-urban or suburban wholesalers in a single social environment. For some traders and consumers, the market is the only space in which they have occasion to interact with individuals from different ethno-linguistic groups. This author has frequently heard rural Fijian-speaking women traders comment that they enjoy coming to the city in order to observe the various cultures and peoples resident in Suva. Likewise, at least some urban residents enjoy the opportunity to interact with traders from different communities, as well as to enquire about unfamiliar agricultural products offered for sale.

During participant observation at the market, the author was often struck by how frequently rural traders who frequent the market on Fridays and Saturdays, the busiest and most lucrative market days, described their excitement at the vibrancy of urban market life. Such traders typically arrive by truck from remote and homogeneously indigenous Fijian rural areas, where most families are related to one another. As one trader remarked to me, "I love coming to Suva, because I get to see Indians and Chinese, all kinds of people. If I can't come to market

one Saturday, my heart will be here.” This is particularly interesting given the hardships women face in coming to market; many such traders travel four or more hours by truck through muddy jungle roads, often foregoing sleep to sell in the market. Yet many of the women I spoke to describe the experience as an exciting break from the monotony of village life.

Although rural indigenous Fijian women traders sometimes spoke about their urban counterparts with some amount of disdain due to their inability to grow their own produce, urban women were also a point of fascination. Rural indigenous Fijians sometimes describe their urban counterparts using the rather disparaging phrase “*sucu madra*”, which literally means “born with bread”. Leavened European-style bread is a staple for many urban families but is a luxury product in remote rural areas, where the main dietary starch consists of root crops such as dalo, cassava or yam. To be *sucu madrai* is to purchase, rather than grow, food for one’s family consumption, which implies steady paid employment and urban residence. While this term is somewhat disparaging because it hints at urban detachment from indigenous Fijian dietary and other cultural norms, it also connotes a level of sophistication that is not found in rural areas.

This interaction between rural and urban residents also has an ethno-linguistic component which is particularly significant in Fiji, wherein ethnicity is highly politicized. Supposed divisions or otherwise unfair relationships between Fiji’s two majority ethno-linguistic groups, mother tongue Fijian speakers and mother tongue Fiji Hindi speakers, have been used to justify all four of Fiji’s coups. Ongoing military rule in Fiji during my 2011 research caused some market traders to joke that the market was the country’s only functioning parliament, which speaks to its power as a space of interaction between communities. It is likely that markets in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are similarly politicized to at least some degree, which is an area that would prove fertile ground for future research.

Markets are also sites that require women to combine their social networks with income generation strategies. Women traders in Papua New Guinea markets, for example, actively engage in interactional strategies that draw together social networks of both kin and trade-related acquaintances (Benediktsson, 1998). Indeed, kin cooperatives or fam-

ily-owned production units play a critical role in producing, transporting, and selling goods (Bourke, 2005; Ross, 2005). Gift exchange is a prominent feature of diverse Papua New Guinea cultural practices, and ceremonial exchange festivals and other gift-giving occasions are critical elements in the production, distribution, and circulation of wealth. Such exchanges are not usually cash-based (Munn, 1992), and there is evidence that market trading both disrupts and contributes to these practices (Lederman, 2009; MacKenzie, 1991).

Women market traders are sometimes able to accumulate significant social power through their cash-generating activities, which at least one study finds to have taken precedence over customary forms of exchange in terms of its ability to generate prestige in the community (Mosko, 1999). Given this fact, it is not surprising that some women go to great lengths in order to maximize their success; traders in Papua New Guinea's Central New Ireland province use *lulleparat* (magic or sorcery), which they acquire from one another in exchange for shell wealth, ceremonial foods, or cash, and which they believe helps them retain customers (Sykes, 2007).

Polynesian marketplaces are also sites of interaction that extend far beyond the exchange of cash for goods. Tahitian markets are vibrant sites for the exchange of information, providing a much-anticipated social space for rural, suburban, and urban residents to intermingle (Pollock, 1988). One ethnographic study of Tonga's secondhand marketplace, where food is also sold, indicates that participation in the market brings together individuals from diverse groups in an otherwise highly stratified social system, since many sellers are women and none are from wealthy or high-ranking chiefly families (Besnier, 2004). It is no coincidence that women's labor helps to facilitate these social exchanges in an environment related to food production and consumption, both of which are highly feminized activities.

Yet participation in the social networks that both create possibilities for and sustain market trade can also have potentially negative consequences. Traders and entrepreneurs on the Polynesian island of Wallis face serious demands from kin and other members of their social networks due to their social obligations to share their profits. This pressure is diminished for those in urban areas, where people have fewer close relationships, less group solidarity, and more individual mobility

(van der Grijp, 2003). One study attributed three separate failures at creating a central market on Wallis to cultural beliefs about work and pride, which inhibited individuals from selling at market because they worried about the quality of their goods, and made potential consumers wary of buying because doing so implied that they could not grow their own crops (van der Grijp, 2002).

Women's desires to engage in market trading as an income generation activity can be strongly influenced by notions of appropriate activities. Two Polynesian studies, for instance, indicate that culturally particular notions of shame may play a role in reducing the number of individuals who are willing to trade in the market. In both of these studies, the authors find that ideas about pride and self-sufficiency significantly inhibit those who might otherwise consider trade as an option for income generation (Addo & Besnier, 2008; van der Grijp, 2003). Yet, as previously mentioned, this notion of shame also has a gendered component whereby male traders experience greater shame than their female counterparts. These cultural notions of shame are extraordinarily complex and clearly inform trading activities despite the fact that they vary amongst ethno-linguistic groups and rural versus urban residents.

The social context in which market traders conduct their everyday activities also informs the challenges they face in carrying out their work. As the following section will illustrate, women market traders throughout the Pacific Island region face a number of quite similar obstacles and hindrances with respect to infrastructure, safety, gender norms, and other concerns.

### **Challenges Faced by Pacific Island Market Traders**

There are numerous organizational and infrastructural challenges that Pacific Island women face in the course of their work. Access to roads and poor transport conditions inhibit individuals' abilities to engage in trade, particularly if they must travel from remote rural areas where roads are sometimes dangerous and unreliable even in the best of circumstances (Hirsch, 1994; McGregor, 2006). Women who travel from villages in Fiji's remote interior to sell at the market have frequently told of the difficulties they face in loading their agricultural goods into a truck in the middle of the night, and then travelling for five hours or

more to Suva. These women must often cling to their bags of produce to avoid falling out of the back of the truck as it travels at unsafe speeds on slippery, badly surfaced roads.

Once rural women reach the market, they must wait outside in the dark until the gates open at sunrise. For some women, this means huddling under makeshift tarpaulin shelters in the darkness as they wait for the market gates to be unlocked. Bad weather impacts road conditions and creates difficulties for those who sell outdoors, but excess or insufficient amounts of rain can also determine market success or failure for those who grow their own produce. Storms and other unexpected weather can significantly undermine a trader's ability to grow and bring produce to market (Ross, 2005). In a Solomon Islands study, women traders reported that bad roads or otherwise difficult transport conditions present challenges to their ability to access markets when they have produce to sell (McGregor, 2006).

The quality of produce is not only impacted by weather, transport conditions, and the use of fertilizers or pesticides, but also by community obligations that require significant time, resources and energy. One study found that nearly ninety percent of resorts and hotels import produce from abroad due to their perception that local produce is inferior in quality and unreliably supplied from villages that have many community responsibilities and events that can take priority over income generation activities (Taulealea, 2005).

The fact that so many market traders describe their working conditions as difficult and unsanitary raises the question of why women do not organize in order to demand improvements to their work environment. Part of the answer lies in a lack of solidarity amongst market traders, which itself stems both from the fact that traders are in competition with one another and from the reality that individuals disperse from the market once their goods are sold, thus diminishing their sense of community (Benediktsson, 1998). While market trading is in fact a permanent source of income generation for many families, cultural beliefs about feminized labor often combines with women's busy schedules to deter them from organizing.

Market traders also report difficulties due to their limited or non-existent access to credit, which significantly impedes their abilities to expand their businesses. Women in Papua New Guinea's tuna industry, in-



cluding market traders, have reported difficulties in accessing credit, which prohibits them from expanding their small businesses (Sullivan & Ram-Bidesi, 2008). Without credit, market traders are unable to expand their operations even when the potential may exist for expansion (McGregor, 2006; Sullivan & Ram-Bidesi, 2008). Women market traders also face risks to their health and safety. Market facilities sometimes lack adequate space, forcing vendors to sell outside where they are exposed to wind, rain, and harsh sun. Some markets have very poor water and toilet facilities that pose serious health risks to vendors, particularly since many vendors spend the majority of their working hours in the market (FPDA, 2009). This situation is only compounded for women who are pregnant or bring small children to market. Violence against women is also a health and safety concern for women market traders, who have reported harassment by customers and others in the market vicinity.

Market traders' stress levels may be increased by the pressure they face as heads of households or as their family's sole source of income. Some market traders have unemployed husbands or other male adults they support in sharp contrast to cultural beliefs about gender roles that position men as heads of families (Lateef, 1994). Frequent requests for financial support in the form of loans or gifts to kin cause many small-scale enterprises to become insolvent. While traders develop their own strategies for coping with these demands from kin and other members of their social network, they sometimes do so in violation of local cultural norms in ways that can create conflict (Curry, 1999; van der Grijp, 2003).

Cultural beliefs about gender also dramatically impact women market traders' experiences of their work. Women's work is often devalued and minimized, despite its significant contribution to families and communities, and market traders are no exception to this. Women's powerful economic and non-economic contributions to their families and the national economies in which they live is all too frequently overlooked by both their own families and national governments (Bourke, 2005; Dunlop, 2003). Women's role in production may be further devalued in societies where men handle the vast majority of cash exchange, which is often viewed as more prestigious (Feinberg, 1986). Women are frequently associated with domestic practices, particularly food preparation and the provision of sexual favors. In one study, these activities were

linked in through an elaborate system closely resembling a market structure (Hammar, 1996).

Given these ongoing difficulties identified by Pacific Island market traders in various studies, how might Pacific Island City or Town Councils improve markets in order to facilitate trade in ways that directly benefit the women who engage in it? The following section offers several evidence-based recommendations for changes to public policy and development practice that might prove beneficial to women market traders.

### **Recommendations for Improving Pacific Island Markets**

Pacific Island markets must be acknowledged by local and national governments as significant sources of revenue. Research has revealed the absolute incorrectness of prevailing assumptions about women's informal sector work as undesirable, poorly paid, and unskilled. Indeed, many women earn considerably more in the informal sector and suffer from less time poverty than they would in other forms of work available to them (Anderson, 2008). Government elites and international organizations frequently undervalue the contributions made by market traders to national economies, leading the authors of one study to characterize the production and marketing of fresh food in Papua New Guinea as "one of the country's biggest success stories (Bourke, 2005).

Market traders should be recognized as businesspeople in order to facilitate their access to credit, which has been an obstacle to many women engaged in trade (Sullivan & Ram-Bidesi, 2008). The work of market traders supplies local as well as global commodity chains (Benediktsson, 2002), and their careful investigations into ways to support themselves and their families should be recognized by local and national governments in order to help reduce some of the stigma associated with market trade (van der Grijp, 2002), and perhaps encourage further local agricultural production and sale.

Local and national government investment in infrastructural improvements to markets will benefit both traders and the communities that they supply. One Solomon Islands-based study recommended the improvement of road conditions to facilitate trade, as well as extending credit managed by a commercial bank into rural areas to support and

encourage agricultural production (McGregor, 2006). Another study, based in Papua New Guinea, indicated that traders' lack of road transport negates any possibility for rural women to engage in trade, even if they have the desire (Hirsch, 1994). Market conditions in many Pacific Island countries require significant improvements to make them safe and hygienic places to work and sell. Making such improvements demonstrates institutional commitment to markets and to market traders, who generate a substantial source of income for local and national economies.

Pacific Island governments should engage in more active promotion of agricultural production and marketing, which could reduce some of the widespread preference for imported and processed foods, the consumption of which has seriously negative health consequences (Gewertz & Errington, 2010). Linking agricultural producers to tourism industry service providers would be particularly useful in countries like Fiji and Tahiti, which derive significant sources of income from tourism. Currently, many such service providers import food rather than utilizing local farmers' crops, which would be both wasteful and unnecessary if proper provisions were made for the exchange of produce and cash between these two parties (Taulealea, 2005).

With concerns about food security again becoming a priority throughout the world, governments can no longer afford to ignore the important roles played by women market traders in bringing affordable and high quality produce to towns and cities. This is particularly true in the Pacific Islands, where climate change continues to create real and immediate threats to sustainable livelihoods. Now, more than ever, governments and policymakers need to work closely with market traders in order to determine ways to facilitate women's economic empowerment and poverty eradication measures while also ensuring a reliable supply of healthy local produce to Pacific towns and urban centers.

## References

- Addo, P., & Besnier, N. (2008). When gifts become commodities: Pawnshops, valuables and shame in Tonga and the Tongan diaspora. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14, 39-49.
- Anderson, T. (2008). Women roadside sellers in Madang. *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 23(1), 59-73.
- Anderson, T. (2010). Land registration, land markets, and livelihoods in Papua New Guinea. In T. Anderson & G. Lee (Eds.), *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land* (pp. 11-20). Canberra, Australia: AID/WATCH.
- Benediktsson, K. (1998). Food markets in the Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea: Actors, power and rural development geography. *Geografiska Annaler*, 80B(3), 159-172.
- Benediktsson, K. (2002). *Harvesting development: The construction of fresh food markets in Papua New Guinea*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Besnier, N. (2004). Consumption and cosmopolitanism: Practicing modernity at the secondhand clothes marketplace in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 77(1), 7-45.
- Besnier, N. (2011). *On the edge of the global: Modern anxieties in a Pacific Island nation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourke, R. (2005). Marketed fresh food: A successful part of the Papua New Guinea economy. *Development Bulletin*, 67, 22-25.
- Brown, R., & Connell, J. (1993). The global flea market: Migration, remittances, and the informal economy in Tonga. *Development & Change*, 24, 611-647.
- Connell, J., & Lea, J. (2007). Living in town: A sustainable future. In J. Connell & J. Lea (Eds.), *Urbanisation in the Island Pacific* (pp. 191-212). New York: Routledge.
- Connelly-Kirch, D. (1982). Economic and social correlates of handicraft selling in Tonga. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9(3), 383-402.
- Curry, G. (1999). Markets, social embeddedness and precapitalist societies: The case of village tradestores in Papua New Guinea. *Geoforum*, 30, 285-298.
- Dunlop, E. (2003). Women and the informal sector. In P. Fairbairn-Dunlop (Ed.), *Samoan women: Widening choices* (pp. 68-78). Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Epstein, T. (1961). A study of Rabaul market. *The Australian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 5, 49-66.
- Epstein, T. (1982). *Urban food marketing and Third World development: The structure*

- of producer-seller markets*. London: Croom Helm.
- Feinberg, R. (1986). Market economy and changing sex-roles on a Polynesian atoll. *Ethnohistory*, 25(4), 271-282.
- Fernandez-Kelly, P., & Sassen, S. (1995). Recasting women in the global economy: Internationalization and changing definitions of gender. In C. Bose, & E. Acosta-Belen (Eds.), *Women in the Latin American Development Process* (pp. 15-36). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fresh Produce Development Agency. (2009). *Feeding Port Moresby*. Port Moresby: Fresh Produce Development Agency and NZAID.
- Gewertz, D. (1977). From sago suppliers to entrepreneurs: Marketing and migration in the Middle Sepik. *Oceania*, 48, 126-140.
- Gewertz, D. (1978). Tit for tat: Barter markets in the Middle Sepik. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 51(1), 37-44.
- Gewertz, D., & Errington, F. (2010). *Cheap meat: Flap food nations in the Pacific Islands*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hammar, L. (1996). Bad canoes and bafalo: The political economy of sex on Daru Island, Western Province, Papua New Guinea. *Genders*, 23, 212-243.
- Hirsch, E. (1994). Between mission and market: Events and images in a Melanesian society. *Man*, 29(3), 689-711.
- Jackson, R. (1976). The impact of the introduction of markets: A case study from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. *Savanna*, 5(2), 175-183.
- Keil, D. (1977). Markets in Melanesia? A comparison of traditional economic transactions in New Guinea with African markets. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 33(3), 258-276.
- Lateef, S. (1994). *Women market vendors in Fiji*. Suva, Fiji: The Fiji Association of Women Graduates.
- Lederman, R. (2009). *What gifts engender: Social relations and politics in Mendi, Highland Papua New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacKenzie, M. (1991). *Androgynous objects: String bags and gender in Central New Guinea*. New York: Routledge.
- McGregor, A. (2006). *Solomons Islands smallholder study: Volume 3, markets and marketing issues*. Canberra, Australia: AusAID.
- Mosko, M. (1999). Magical money: Commodity and the linkage of *maketsi* ("market") and *kangakanga* ("custom") in contemporary North Mekeo. In D. Akin & J. Robbins (Ed.), *Money and Modernity: State and Local Currencies in Melanesia* (pp. 41-61). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Munn, N. (1992). *The fame of Gava: A symbolic study of value transformation in a*

- Massim society*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pollock, N. (1988). The market-place as meeting place in Tahiti. In N. Pollock & R. Crocombe (Eds.), *French Polynesia* (pp. 202-213). Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Ross, G. (1978). Baegu markets, areal integration, and economic efficiency in Malaita, Solomon Islands. *Ethnology*, 17(2), 119-138.
- Ross, G. (2005). Marketing fresh food in Papua New Guinea: The Alele story. *Development Bulletin*, 67, 25-27.
- Singh, J. (1996). A survey of market vendors in a rural township: Could more schooling assist rural market vendors? *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 19, 159-172.
- Sullivan, N., & Ram-Bidesi, B. (2008). *Gender issues in Pacific Island tuna fisheries: Case studies in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Kiribati*. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Forum Fisheries Agency, and Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- Suva City Council. (2008). *Notice of Ordinary Meetings, 24 January*. Suva, Fiji: Suva City Council.
- Suva City Council. (2010). *Notice of Ordinary Meetings, 17 December*. Suva, Fiji: Suva City Council.
- Sykes, K. (2007). The moral grounds of critique: Between possessive individuals, entrepreneurs, and big-men in Papua New Guinea. *Anthropological Forum*, 17(3), 255-268.
- Taulealea, S. (2005). *A feasibility study for developing a marketing center at the Navuso Agricultural School in Fiji*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Wyoming, Laramie.
- Umezaki, M., & Ohtsuka, R. (2003). Adaptive strategies of Highlands-origin migrant settlers in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. *Human Ecology*, 31(1), 3-25.
- Van Der Grijp, P. (2002). Selling is poverty, buying a shame: Representations of work, effective leadership and market failures on Wallis. *Oceania*, 73, 17-34.
- Van Der Grijp, P. (2003). Between gifts and commodities: Commercial enterprise and the trader's dilemma on Wallis (Uvea). *The Contemporary Pacific*, 15, 277-307.

*Biographical Note:* Cultural anthropologist **Susan Dewey** is currently at work on the initial phase of a long-term project with Fiji's women market traders. She has written three books: *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town* (University of California Press, 2011), *Hollow Bodies: Institutional Responses to Sex Trafficking in Armenia, Bosnia and India* (Kumarian Press, 2008), and *Making Miss India Miss World: Constructing Gender, Power, and the Nation in Postliberalization India* (Syracuse University Press, 2008). Her co-edited volumes include *Policing Pleasure: Global Reflections on Sex Work and Public Policy*, with Patty Kelly (New York University Press, 2011) and *Super Girls, Gangstas, Freeters and Xenomaniacs: Gender and Modernity in Global Youth Cultures*, with Karen Brison (Syracuse University Press, 2012). Susan has published articles in the journals *American Ethnologist*, *Journal of South Asian Popular Culture*, *Labor: Journal of Working Class History in the Americas*, and *Ethnography and Education*, and her research, in book chapter form, has appeared in nearly a dozen edited volumes, many of which have been published with university presses. E-mail: sdewey3@uwo.edu