



# Lagoon livelihoods: gender and shell money in Langalanga, Solomon Islands

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## Abstract

Gender shapes livelihoods through access to resources and the distribution of benefits from economic activities. To work effectively with local people, resource management and community development initiatives should therefore be sensitive to the influence of gender on livelihoods. This paper considers gender in the context of broader social trends around livelihoods and focuses on a case study of shell money production and trade in the Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands. We pool data from several recent research projects with historical material from secondary sources. We find that the gender division of labour in the shell money value chain has changed somewhat over time, particularly in that women are now actively involved in trading. However, this shift has created friction due to norms about what kinds of activities are suitable for women, and who should control cash incomes. Whilst shell money remains one of the most important livelihoods in Langalanga lagoon, our findings also illustrate that the shell money value chain and the income earned varies considerably from family to family, with some making a better living than others. We argue that interventions seeking to improve livelihoods in coastal communities should thus be based on an understanding of differentiation within communities, and practitioners should consider whether interventions will result in community development, or may have the impact of increasing inequality between families.

**Keywords** Coastal fisheries · Value chain · Division of labour · Sustainable development · Women · Pacific Islands · Shell money

## Introduction

The natural environment is centrally important to coastal communities for food, cash income and cultural values. Growing threats to the sustainability of these resources and limited economic opportunities in remote coastal locations have led to an increasing number of externally initiated interventions seeking to deliver locally appropriate solutions for sustainable livelihoods. A first step is to understand how coastal communities and different people within those communities participate in and benefit from livelihoods in their current context.

Many studies highlight that accommodating gender roles, norms and relations is critical to ensuring livelihood initiatives

realise equitable benefits. Beliefs around women's and men's respective capabilities, the kinds of activities that are socially acceptable for women and men, and power relations between men and women shape people's access to resources necessary to livelihood pursuits. These factors also affect women's and men's relative abilities to participate in economic activities, their voice in decision-making about the use of coastal resources and the distribution of benefits (Cohen et al. 2016; Hillenbrand et al. 2015; Kawarazuka et al. 2016).

Gender is now a mainstreamed consideration within international and Pacific regional commitments focused on small-scale and coastal fisheries (FAO 2015; SPC 2015). Systematic efforts to collect sex-disaggregated information on coastal resource use, however, are largely yet to be realised (Harper et al. 2013; Kleiber et al. 2015). There is also a dearth of information about gender norms and relations in coastal fisheries generally. In the Pacific, there are large gaps in our understanding of how and why particular communities divide the work associated with fisheries, structure decision-making about resources and distribute benefits (Leisher et al. 2016).

This paper responds to a need for better information around gendered aspects of fisheries and fisheries-based livelihoods

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through a case study of gender in the context of broader social trends around livelihoods, illuminating historical shifts and contemporary patterns. We focus specifically on one of the most frequent occupations—the production and trade of shell money—in the Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita Province in Solomon Islands (see Fig. 1). Shell money (described below) is not only a central focus of livelihood activities for Langalanga people, it is also core to Langalanga identity (Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005; Guo 2001, 2003). Findings may offer methodological insights for people working on livelihood or value chain development with coastal communities and some practical insights for those with a focus on Langalanga Lagoon. Questions we address include the following: How has gender influenced the distribution of labour and income in the production of shell money and shell jewellery in Langalanga over time? What role does shell money play within contemporary livelihoods in Langalanga? How do gender norms shape shell money value chains within the wider livelihoods portfolio? The first section of the paper draws on the ethnographic literature to sketch out the history of shell money production and trade, from the pre-colonial period through the changes that occurred through colonialism.

The second section of the paper then uses data collected in our recent projects to reflect on how shell money activities fit into the overall livelihood strategies of women and men within and between households.

### Shell money

Various forms of shell money were used widely in the pre-colonial period throughout the islands in the southwest Pacific, the region known as Melanesia (Belshaw 1950; Akin and Robbins 1999). Some are simple white rings 15 cm or more in diameter, and others made from long strings of beads (one centimetre or less in diameter) where strings are worked up into a variety of forms, including elaborate decorative pieces for the head and upper body. Shell money pieces were an important part of the Melanesian ‘big man’ feasting, trading and warfare culture. They were used to seal marriages through bride price, to settle disputes and to display power and wealth in ceremonial occasions (Belshaw 1950; Cooper 1972). These days, shell money is still exchanged for bride price, offered as compensation in disputes and traded in exchange for cash, goods or services (Cooper 1971; Faradato

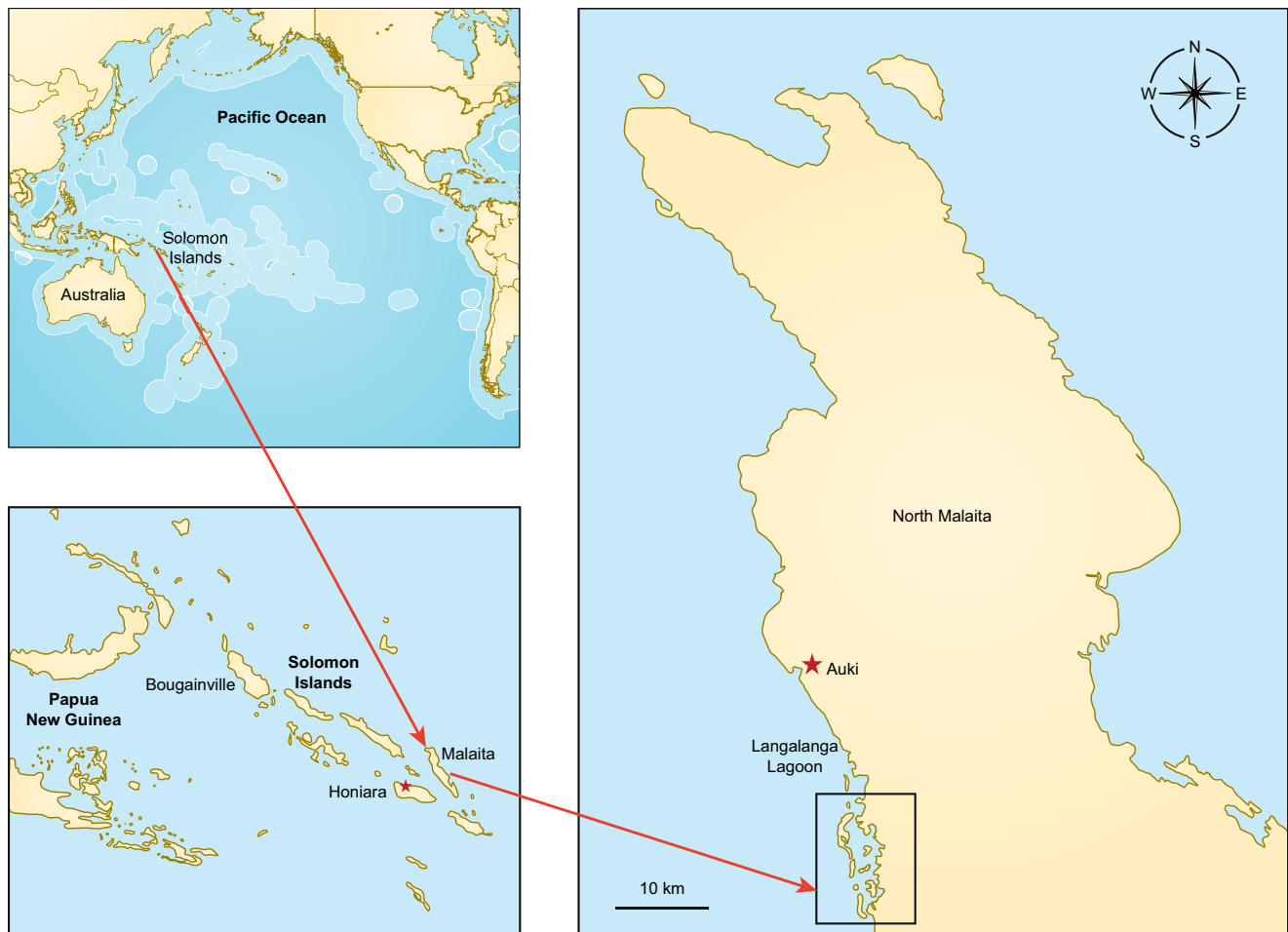


Fig. 1 Map of Langalanga Lagoon in Solomon Islands

2008; Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005; Goto 1996; Robbins and Akin 1999).

It is estimated that around 18,000 people live in Langalanga.<sup>1</sup> Shell money manufactured around the Langalanga Lagoon is comprised of strings of hundreds to thousands of small beads (see Fig. 2). Several different types of shell are used. White beads are made from a shell called in local language *kakadu* (*Anadara granosa*) and black beads used at the end of shell money strings are from *kurila* (*Atrina vexillum*). Some beads are heated to bring out their colour, including red beads from *romu* (*Chama pacifica*) and orange beads *ke'e* (*Beguina semiorbiculata*). Some Langalanga shell money is exported regionally, including to Bougainville and Vanuatu. In recent decades, a market has also emerged for shell jewellery—necklaces, bracelets, anklets and earrings made of shell money beads, glass beads and other shells. Shell jewellery does not have the cultural meanings of shell money so is not as governed by tradition and uses a much wider variety of shells than shell money. Large pieces of shell money used for marriage and other ceremonial purposes are expensive to produce and sales are relatively infrequent. Shell jewellery can be sold in much greater numbers and produced with less up-front investment. It is popular among Solomon Islanders as well as the small numbers of overseas tourists visiting the country.

## Methods and data

This paper combines data from several previous independent research efforts (conducted between 2010 and 2017) that examined different aspects of livelihoods in the Langalanga Lagoon region. The primary research consisted of qualitative interviews, focus group discussions and quantitative household questionnaires. The interviews were about gender in shell money livelihoods, conducted by K. Barclay (2014, one woman and two family groups in three Langalanga villages) and N. McClean (2017, seven women and two men in Honiara and Tulagi). The focus groups were about fisheries as a source of income and food conducted in 2010–2011 (five groups of women and seven groups of men in nine Langalanga villages) as part of research led by S. Foale. S. Foale's 2010 research also included a questionnaire of 81 households (including women and men) in eight Langalanga villages. The other household questionnaire was part of research led by R. Sulu in 2013 involving 235 households (women and men) across 19 Langalanga villages, on the topic of income, diet and fisheries governance. In this paper, we present our findings

<sup>1</sup> The most recent national population record (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2011) stated that the population of Langalanga was about 16,500. With a national population growth rate of 3.8% between 2009 and 2013 (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2015), taking mortality into account, the current population would be around 18,000.

around the cases of five families who were interviewed, then contextualise those families' stories with data from the focus group and household questionnaire studies, as well as points from the literature.

We also use secondary data, particularly ethnographic writing on the Langalanga region, to provide historical accounts of gender norms and roles associated with livelihoods. We used standard qualitative literature searching and analysis techniques (as opposed to conducting a systematic literature review), starting with documents on shell money production in Langalanga, and looking further for papers on regional shell money trade and production, the gender division of labour in Melanesia, mixed livelihood strategies in Melanesia, and gender relations and norms in fisheries.

We analysed the primary and secondary data using a thematic analysis of material (Flick 2013), iterating between primary and secondary material. We focused on the gender division of labour and the cultural aspects of gender in livelihoods (Harding 1986), including norms about what kinds of activities are socially acceptable for women and men, as well as who has authority for control over incomes and decision-making about livelihoods at the household level, and people's livelihood aspirations. This meant drawing initially from the qualitative interview, focus group and secondary source data factual statements about who does what, as well as comments explaining why livelihoods are arranged that way. We then turned to the household questionnaires for further evidence about the themes that arose from the qualitative data, such as diet composition or recognition of women's groups.

## Shell money and gender in Langalanga livelihoods

The Langalanga trace their beginning as a people to the journeys of ancestors to the lagoon from mainland Malaita some 350 years ago (Guo 2001). Individual settler families lived on small islets that they built up in the lagoon with chunks of coral rock. On these tiny islets, gardening was difficult and Langalanga families had limited rights to use adjacent land, so fishing and shell money were the main livelihood activities. The Langalanga traded fish and shell money with neighbouring groups in Malaita and other islands for fruit and vegetables and became widely recognised as skilled traders, boat builders and seafarers (Cooper 1971; Guo 1996). Oral histories link settlement of the Langalanga with the origins of shell money, telling of an ancestor, usually female, establishing shell money production in the lagoon (Guo 2006; Belshaw 1950). During the colonial period, Langalanga people established a regional trade in shell money, including to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (Connell 1977) and sold small amounts to visiting tourists (Cooper 1971), but Honiara has long been the main hub for selling shell money.

**Fig. 2** Shell money and jewellery for sale at Honiara Central Markets. Photo credits: Kate Barclay and Nicholas McClean



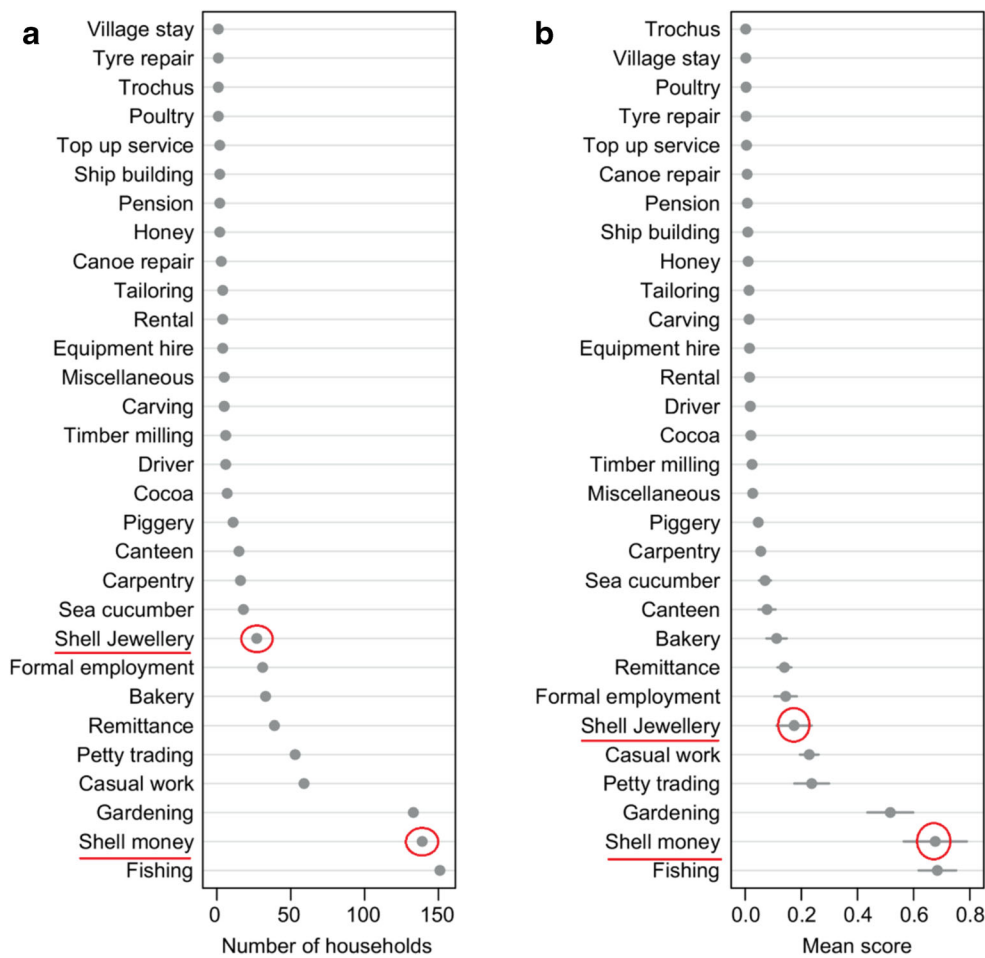
Other economic activities Langanaga people have undertaken since the colonial era include acting as brokers in the trade of copra between surrounding islands and the central markets in Honiara; building and running cargo vessels; small-scale commercial fishing for a range of pelagic species; small-scale fishing for high-value invertebrate commodities such sea cucumber and *Trochus niloticus* (trochus) shells; and wage work in Honiara in government jobs, construction and shipping industries (Roeger et al. 2016; Cooper 1971; Goto 1996; Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005; Faradatolo 2008). Shell money, however, remains one of the most important sources of income in Langanaga (see Fig. 3).

Whilst overall shell money is an important livelihood activity for Langanaga people, the reliance of particular villages on shell money is heterogenous. In S. Foale's (unpublished) household survey data from 2010, 70 out of 81 households across eight villages listed shell money as their primary income source, but one of the nine Langanaga villages investigated (Lilisiana) listed fishing rather than shell money as the main source of income. Other researchers found that people in one particular village spent as much as 95% of their productive time making shell money (Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005). In another village, total income from 'trading' was larger than that for shell money (Faradatolo 2008 p.106). In four out of five focus group discussions conducted with women in Langanaga villages in 2010 (S. Foale's research), women said that if they had a cash windfall of SBD1,000 or SBD10,000, they would invest in raw materials for shell

money or buy finished pieces to trade (see Fig. 4). In five of the seven focus groups with men, shell money was said to be one of the most important livelihood activities.

The research on livelihoods conducted by Sulu et al. (2015) disaggregated shell money value chains into two broad categories: shell money and shell jewellery. Our qualitative interview data from 2014 unpack this further into the multiple stages involved in sourcing raw products, crafting and stringing beads and selling end products at market or to another actor who then on-sells (Fig. 5). This more disaggregated analysis of shell money and jewellery production is critical in understanding the gender divisions of labour, decision-making and controls of assets along different 'nodes' of the value chain. The remainder of this paper examines the gendered aspects of shell money, as a value chain and livelihood.

The gender division of labour in the nodes along the shell money value chain has changed somewhat over time. In the past, free diving in the sea to collect shells was considered to be men's work (as was fishing in general). Some of the shells used could be picked up on beaches, and this was historically the role of female youth, who also broke the shells into rough disc shapes and drilled holes (Guo 2001) (see Fig. 4). By the 1990s, some women were diving (Guo 2001). Our 2010 focus group data show that women both fished (for example, with a handline from a canoe) and dived, including to collect shells. 'We fish in the mangrove and sea. Some women here are expert divers and go diving for fish.' (Lilisiana village). In the village of Ailau, however, women neither fished nor dived,



**Fig. 3** Household income sources in Langalanga Lagoon, 2013. Source: reproduced from Sulu et al. (2015). **a** Frequency distribution of the number of households mentioning the different livelihood activities. **b** Weighted mean livelihood importance score

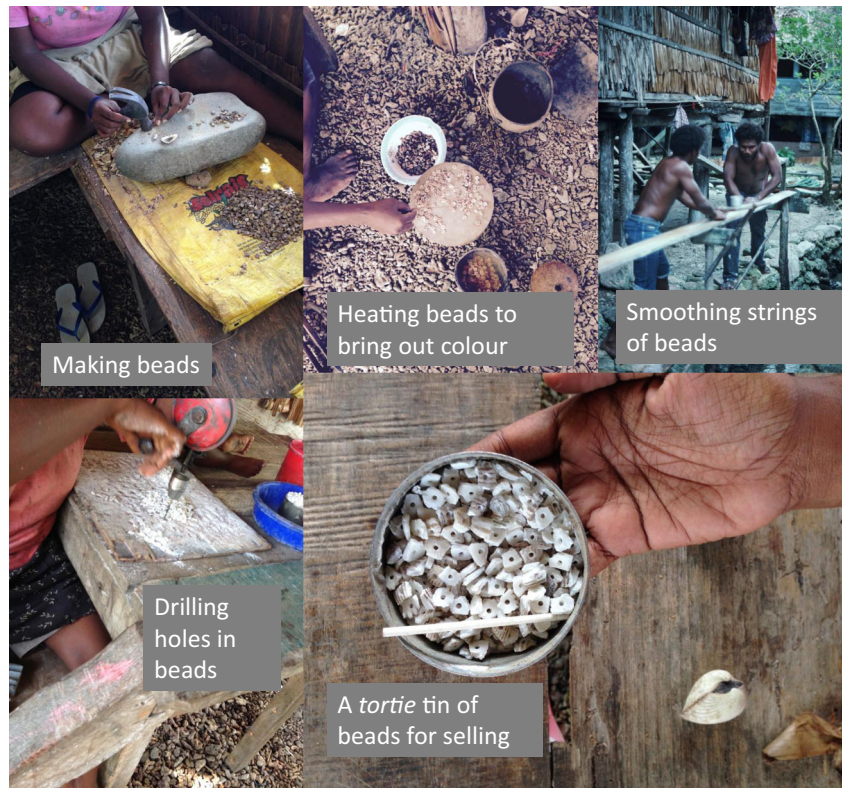
but instead focused on gardening and shell money manufacturing (see Fig. 5 for activities between shell harvest and retail in the value chain). Our fieldwork observations indicated youth still contribute to the early parts of the manufacturing process, and men are involved throughout, but most of the manufacturing is done by women. In the Oibola women’s focus groups, they said that making shell money is a ‘women’s job’. Discussions from the men’s focus group in Ailau suggested that women do most of the work in shell jewellery manufacture and conventionally men would go fishing; however, as the income earned from shell jewellery is more than from fishing in recent times, more men are staying at home to help with shell jewellery production.

Due to shortages of shells in Langalanga from over-harvesting, shells are now mostly sourced from other areas. Shortages of shells were noted as early as the 1960s (Cooper 1971) and have continued (Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005). By the 1990s, Langalanga people were travelling to dive for shells in other parts of Malaita or buying shells from other provinces (Guo 2001, p.49; Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005). According to our interviews and observations, shells are

most often bought in sacks at Honiara Central Market. Interviewees in 2014 reported that the shells they bought seemed to be smaller in size than before, so it could be that the trade in shells has spread overfishing, indicating sustainability concerns for shell money livelihoods. Two focus groups raised sustainability concerns, including for new species of shells being targeted now, as the usual species were depleted.

The largest change to the gender division of labour in shell money activities over time is that since the 1990s, women now do most of the retail trading. Trade has long been an important livelihood activity for the land-poor Langalanga because they have limited access to land for gardening for food production. In the pre-colonial period, fears of violence breaking out in trading situations meant that trading was usually conducted by women (Guo 2001; Ross 2017). With reductions in violence after colonialism, however, where trading involved travel of more than one day, it came to be considered as men’s work, in part due to norms that it was inappropriate for women to travel away from their families (Keesing 1985; Maranda 2001). Our interviewees said that before the 1990s, men conducted the shell money trading trips to Bougainville and Honiara, but that

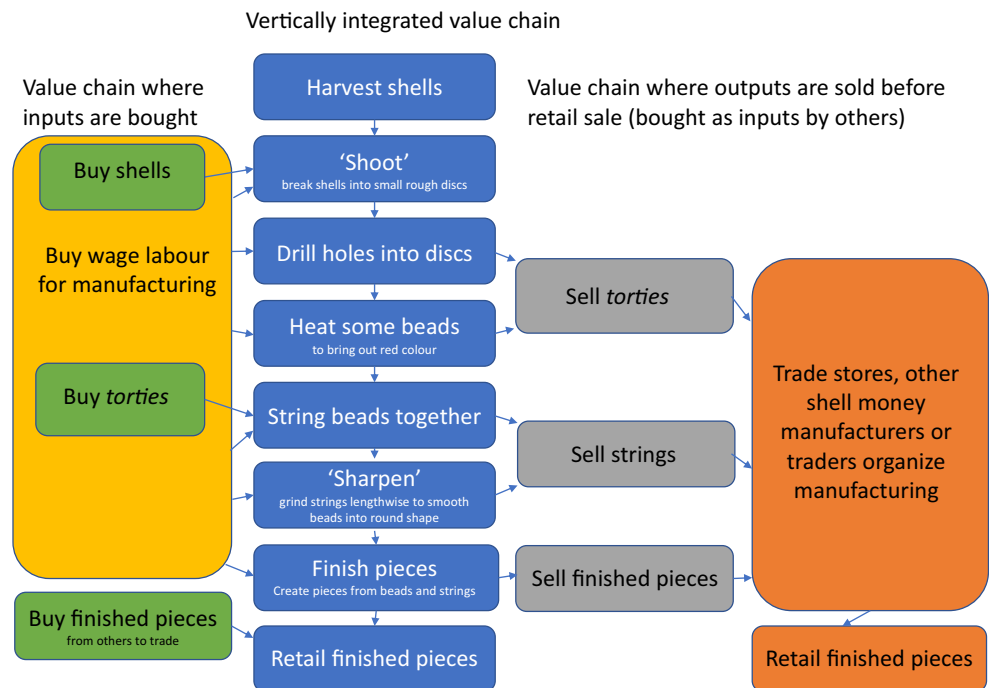
**Fig. 4** Shell money production. Photo credits: Simon Foale and Kate Barclay



since then, women had become active in the Honiara-based trade. According to Fidali-Hickey and Whippy-Morris (2005), women became more involved in trading because men tended to spend the proceeds from the sale of shell money on alcohol, gambling and extra-marital affairs, rather than bring the money home to the family. This explanation was also prominent in

our interviews and resonates with findings on gender in development more broadly that women, more than men, tend to use income for family investment (Chaaban and Cunningham 2011). In one of the seven men’s focus groups in 2010, men noted that the windfall amounts of SBD1000 or 10,000 discussed in the focus groups could easily be spent on

**Fig. 5** Shell money value chain. Source: authors’ interviews and focus groups. *Torties* are empty tuna cans (185 g) filled with unfinished beads that have a cash value. They can be traded for goods at trade stores, or sold to other shell money makers. Prices of between SBD1 and SBD8 (USD0.13–1.0) for one *tortie* of undrilled beads were recorded in our interviews



drinking alcohol or gambling. Other men's groups discussed spending the money on food or distributing the money within communities. All five of the women's focus groups said they would use such windfalls for various family-related expenses.

Norms against women travelling and leaving domestic duties, however, mean it is not socially easy for women to spend weeks at a time in Honiara on trading trips, especially if they have young children (Keesing 1985; Maranda 2001). Three of our interviewees noted that women who travel for trade are subject to rumours that they have sexual liaisons whilst travelling, leading to conflict, including violence. There is also the practical problem of childcare. In some cases, extended family arrangements or domestic workers can cover caring responsibilities for women who work away from home. Interviewees noted, however, that this did not work well in all cases, echoing findings about childcare and women involved in wage labour in the tuna industry in Solomon Islands (Krushelnyska 2015).

## Family case studies

### Family A

Family A lives in a village on the mainland, which was settled during World War II when bombing destroyed their previous settlement on an islet. Family A has access to gardening land, which in the past has been used for growing pineapple as a cash crop. There is a water supply nearby, and the men of the family sometimes fish for local consumption. They are too far away from the markets at Auki to consider trying to sell fish there. The older women draw on the assistance of the family including children for shell money manufacture, and men help with drilling and sharpening the shell beads when they are not fishing. This family sometimes sell *torties* for food at the local trade store, and they also buy *torties* from other families for manufacturing shell money and jewellery. When they have enough finished pieces, the older women of the family travel to Honiara for periods of some weeks to trade. They stay with relatives whilst trading. They generate around SBD4–5000 per trip (USD530–665). SBD2000 (USD266) of that is spent on buying sacks of shells and living costs in Honiara. They use the income from shell money for family expenses including clothes, food and school fees.

The women traders of family A said shell money was 'a lot of work', taking hours and hours to produce every piece. Family A seemed to be making a reasonable income, in that they were able to afford school fees and other large family costs. Some families seemed to be struggling more than family A to make a living from shell money.

### Family B

Family B lives in a village on a small islet, with limited space and poor soil for gardening, no local fresh water supplies and

without good access to the markets at Auki. Women, men and children in family B make shell money. The men also go fishing for food and sell some in the local market. They have some gardening land, but it is far away so it is either a long paddle or an expensive outboard motor boat trip to use their gardening land. They sell *torties* of shell money beads to a trade store in the lagoon in exchange for rice, instant noodles, tinned food and outboard motor fuel. For family B, fishing and making shell money is a difficult life, and it is hard to get ahead financially. They live mostly a hand-to-mouth existence, with the remoteness of their islet and the need to travel for gardening and water collection limiting the amount of cash income they can generate. They do not have much opportunity to build up finances to invest in income-generating activities, or to pay for large costs such as school fees. Their diet is also quite low in fresh vegetables and fruit, and high in processed store-bought foods.

Further research would be needed to establish clearly why some families make a better living out of shell money than others, but our interviews indicate some possible causes and indicators. According to our household interviews and research by Fidali-Hickey and Whippy-Morris (2005), life on the islets is tough, particularly for women, who bear a shared responsibility with men to source food, and carry most of the responsibility for cooking and washing. Most families do not have rainwater tanks or easily accessible sources of cooking fuel. Paddling canoes to collect fresh water from a river on the mainland, visit gardens and cut fuel wood can take many hours a day. Doing this, plus cooking, washing and caring for children, and making shell money, makes for a very heavy workload. Two of the focus groups in villages on islets related similar stories to that of family B. Respondents in one village said shell money enabled them to buy food—but not much beyond food. They believe education is very important but many of their children did not go to school because they do not have the resources for canoe trips to take children to school, a problem that occurs in various areas around the country. Not every family in their village had access to gardening land, and fresh water was sourced from the mainland by canoe. Respondents in the second islet village focus group also noted the need for canoe transport for school and sourcing fresh water. By contrast, one of the mainland focus group villages, like family A, was in the fortunate position of having gardening land, water supply, firewood, a school and a clinic within their village. Spending less time paddling means more time is available for shell money manufacture.

Lack of gardening land means Langalanga people rely heavily on cash, and therefore cash-earning activities including shell money, for food. In our 2010 household survey, when respondents were asked to recall the main staple from their last two meals. Rice and/or flour products were reported by 58% (meal 1) and 52% (meal 2), with the rest saying it was garden vegetables. There was not the same reliance on store-bought food for protein visible in the survey, as may be expected for a

fishing people. Only 21% (meal 1) and 17% (meal 2) of those surveyed had eaten tinned fish in their previous meals, with the rest eating fresh fish. Access to land for gardening was cited by focus groups in six of the nine villages as very important for sourcing food; however, five groups cited problems accessing garden land and four said the main issue was disputes with landowning groups. One focus group said that shell money was exchanged as part of garden access arrangements.

Our research indicates that shell money incomes may be better for families who traded finished pieces in Honiara, and lesser for those who only manufactured shell money. In our interviews and focus group discussions, those who were making enough income from shell money to afford things like sending their children to school and housing improvements were selling finished pieces in Honiara (family A, and see below families C, D, E). Family B, by contrast, seemed to sell most of their beads and strings to trade stores for daily needs and did not mention going to Honiara to sell finished pieces. In the focus group discussions, two groups of women said that if they had SBD10,000, one thing they would do is buy up finished pieces of shell money to trade in Honiara, Bougainville or Vanuatu. To better understand the livelihood possibilities of shell money, further research is needed on where in the value chain most value is accrued, whether the proportion of product sold as *torties* relates to total family income, and why families focus more on sale of *torties* or trade in finished pieces as a livelihood strategy.

### Family C

Extended family C runs a boat-building business. Wooden trading boats of around 20–30 m in length in various stages of construction can be seen in villages around the Langalanga Lagoon. The boat-building business is capital intensive, with costs said to be as high as 80% of the sale price. Each boat takes 10 years or more to build. Families must therefore mobilise a range of income-generating activities to enable them to finish boats. Fishing, including blast fishing (sometimes called ‘dynamite fishing’), has been one of the main ways families have funded boat-building ventures. The build is undertaken by male members of the family, who assist across many years without requiring a specific wage (Guo 2011). Family C’s business helps support the families of the workers, which at the time of interview in 2017 totaled 37 people. This includes covering basic subsistence needs and larger amounts of money needed for school fees, or compensation in cases of family disputes. Interviewees stressed the importance of not using wage labour—relying on *wantok*<sup>2</sup> reciprocity was presented as an important way to maintain social cohesion. Furthermore,

the ability of family leaders to raise labour and to compensate for it within *wantok* relations is an important demonstration of male leadership prestige. According to the interviewees, resorting to wage labour would be seen as failure.

Women in family C support the boat-building business, in part by generating income during the long period whilst boats are being built, along with other sources of income from other businesses in which this family has been involved over the years. Women family members joined a shell money co-operative, which began with the assistance of a small foreign aid grant in the 1990s. The co-operative buys a sack of shells for each member from the proceeds of previous sales, and then each of the members provides labour to other women, rotating among members so that each woman can build up shell money strings without having to outlay personal capital. These strings plus jewellery are then sold by co-operative members for cash in Honiara. Some strings are used for family weddings. The proceeds of sales pay for daily living expenses and school fees, and contribute to the family boat-building business. Interviewees also noted that women in family C have moderated the enthusiasm of the men to throw all family resources into boat building. Women have insisted that the family retains a portfolio livelihood approach and not risk everything on boat building.

Family C shows how shell money can fit within wider livelihood portfolios. The portfolio livelihood approach contributes to economic resilience in Melanesia, where a very limited range of cash-earning activities are viable, and can be unreliable (Eriksson et al. 2016; Sulu et al. 2015). Family C’s story also displays features of the Melanesian hybrid economy business model identified in the literature that mixes capitalist business with economic practices embedded within customary culture (see Lingenfelter 1977; Martin 2007; McCormack and Barclay 2013; Curry 2005; Curry and Koczberski 2013; Sahlins 2005). Family C draws on *wantok* networks for labour and resources as part of a reciprocal arrangement, and devotes the benefits of these endeavours to classically Melanesian social goals, such as the building of male respect and prestige. The hybrid business model has also been found to contribute to economic resilience (Barrau 1958; Lingenfelter 1977). Having a portfolio of several economic activities provides a safety net in case of failure of any one activity, and the *wantok* ethos encourages members to support each other in times of need.

In terms of gender relations in family C’s case, one point worth considering is the role of women in decision-making. Women’s voices appear to have been heard in family C’s decision to maintain livelihood diversity, if from a subordinate position. At the village level in Malaita, women have come to play a more prominent role in public life in recent decades, including in community and household decision-making, through singing groups, church groups, shell money co-operatives and savings clubs (Dickson-Waiko 2003; Douglas

<sup>2</sup> *Wantok* is a Solomons Pijin word for kin networks. It is used also to refer to economic practices between kin seen as different from capitalism, such as demand sharing, and reciprocal sharing of labour.



2003; Eves and Crawford 2014; Monson 2013; Pollard 2000; Pollard 2003; Scheyvens 2003). Women's empowerment in Solomon Islands, however, has not been a smooth transition towards a greater role in decision-making. It is characterised by friction between developments towards gender equity and claims around the value of 'traditional' gender roles and norms (Dyer 2017). In household survey data collected in 2013, recognition of women's groups in Langalanga seems low. Only 28% of responses to a question about groups that exist in their village mentioned women's groups. Within the same villages, some respondents included women's groups whilst others did not, possibly indicating that women's groups are not clearly visible to respondents. Only 9 out of 235 responses included women's groups in responding to the question about which groups are trusted to deal with village issues.

The second gendered point of note in family C's livelihood story is that the men's work of boat building was put by interviewees at the centre of their story, with women's work of shell money portrayed in a support role. This is quite a different picture from the centrality of shell money in interviews with families A and B. The picture of shell money in livelihoods varies yet again for the two single mothers in families D and E.

#### Family D

Family D is headed by a woman in her 50s, who started making a living from shell money in her 20s when her marriage broke down, leaving her with three children to care for. She started out making shell money. This was not particularly profitable, so she increased the trading side of her business, buying shell money from other villagers to sell in Honiara. She also employed wage labourers to make shell money for her. She occasionally acted as a broker selling large amounts of shell money and jewellery to traders servicing markets in Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Some of these deals were worth as much as SBD30,000 (USD4000). The head of family D did not save surplus money generated from her shell money business. After covering her costs and meeting family needs, she invested in improving her housing and in a separate business. Her children have left home and she has remarried. She now relies on her other business for most of her income, but she still does some shell money and jewellery production and trade as part of her livelihood portfolio.

The head of family D lives on an islet, but having a reasonable cash income makes life on an islet easier than for family B. She has a rainwater tank and uses gas bottles for cooking, so fresh water and fuel are not a daily problem for her. She composts organic waste in raised garden beds around her house, and with stored rainwater, she can water plants, so she grows some fruit and vegetables on the islet. She can afford fuel and an outboard motor for travelling to buy other food at nearby markets.

To better understand the differences in livelihoods we see between these families, analysis of the Langalanga shell money value chain could be supplemented with social livelihoods analysis, looking at how various types of capital affect livelihood capabilities (DFID n.d.). The overall picture from our data is that the lack of natural capital on the islets seems to be one factor affecting livelihoods, as can be seen for family B, but family D was able to go beyond a hand-to-mouth existence even whilst living on an islet. The head of family D worked out the ways of engaging with the shell money value chain that would be most profitable and pursued opportunities in an entrepreneurial manner. Our data does not explain why family D did this when family B did not, but it is possible that in family D's case, the lack of natural capital was ameliorated by having other forms of capital, such as human, social or financial. Certainly, human capital, in the form of education, seems to be one factor affecting the livelihood options available to family E.

#### Family E

Family E is made up of a single mother in her mid-30s with three children. When the father left the family, the mother sought a South Pacific Business Development microfinance loan to start a business. She finished high school and so is more literate and numerate than most Solomon Islander women, who on average receive nine years of schooling (UNDP 2016). She was able to complete the business planning modules and a one-week workshop required to qualify for the loan. She employs 10 women for three days a week for two months making shell money. She pays the women one tin full of beads (a *tortie*, worth up to USD1) per day. She then sells finished shell money and jewellery in Honiara, which takes her roughly one month, clearing a profit of around SBD4500 (USD600) per three-month cycle. She also buys strings of beads from women in her village and uses those to make finished pieces to sell in Honiara, making a profit of roughly SBD50 (USD6.50) per string.

When the head of family E started her business she made an explicit choice to be self-reliant. She does not ask for money or labour from her *wantoks* to run her business or to support her family, and also she does not give money to *wantoks* when they ask for it, going against the social norm of demand sharing. She helps her parents and immediate family if they need it, but she says that she made it clear to her wider *wantok* network that she is working under a different system. She had some complaints about that initially, some of her relatives tried to shame her out of her chosen business approach, saying 'hey, you should give your money'. She said her choice has been hard because of strong norms in her society that people live to help each other and that wealth should be shared. She understands why many women choose not to have an independent business but work within established women's

groups, or stick to the homemaker role. As a struggling single mother, however, she feels she had to make the choice to keep her income for herself and her children.

The head of family E said that not having a husband left her more free to pursue her business than married women. Her observation was that among married couples where the woman starts a business, men often help with the business because of the income, but at the same time feel uncomfortable with or threatened by their wife bringing in her own money. She said one businesswoman told her that her husband often complained about her business, became jealous and suspicious, and was possibly taking his wife's money.<sup>3</sup>

The mother from family E was better situated to run a business than most Langalanga women because she had the human capital of having finished high school. Many women in Solomon Islands generate income through small businesses selling handicrafts or food in markets so low levels of schooling are not an insurmountable barrier, but poor numeracy and literacy makes business more difficult (UN Women 2014).

Another point that stands out in cases D and E is that both were single mothers and both had a decidedly capitalist approach to their livelihoods. This involved the use of wage labour, buying inputs to boost the trade part of their business, and in E's case, an explicit rejection of *wantok* obligations to share her income. In Malaita, where bride price is paid, husbands' relatives often feel justified in making claims on wives' incomes (Macintyre 2011). With our post hoc data, we have no conclusive findings on this point, but we can pose some questions for exploration in future research, particularly about the kind of social capital women have within family networks in relation to livelihoods. The *wantok* system is clearly identified by the ethnographic literature as a form of social capital that provides a safety net (Curry 2005; Gregory 1999, 2015; Martin 2007; Sahllins 2005). Are single mothers fully covered by this net, or does their lack of married status mean they are somehow marginalised and thus have little choice but to pursue a more capitalist business path? Is it possible for women to lead a *wantok*-based business model, or is this option not open for single mothers needing to ensure family income? Does the social capital of the *wantok* system control women's economic choices tightly, and being single frees women to pursue livelihoods more effectively? How does being inside or outside the *wantok* system affect women's livelihood outcomes, in conjunction with other livelihood capitals and influences?

The capitalist entrepreneurialism displayed by the women heads of families D and E also raises questions about whether this approach will lead to community development, or just to the improvement of the economic outlooks of particular

families. Do wage workers in shell money make a good livelihood? Or do they fall behind shell money traders? Similarly, in the cases of families C and E, small loans seem to have been useful for developing their shell money businesses, but it is hard to see that a loan could be useful for family B. For family B, improved access to fresh water, vegetables and cooking fuel may be the best way to enable them to make more income from shell money and improve livelihood outcomes. Internationally, microfinance as a development intervention has been criticised as sometimes worsening rather than alleviating poverty (Hermes and Lensink 2011). If microfinance were the only intervention offered in Langalanga, one result might be a perverse outcome of widened inequalities between families.

## Conclusion

Livelihoods in rural and remote places like Langalanga are typically tightly tied to natural resources. They are increasingly the focus of development interventions aimed at relieving the pressure on coastal resources, such as coral reefs, often called 'alternative' or 'supplementary' livelihood development. The central goal of such interventions may be to increase ecological sustainability in livelihoods, but local people's own development aspirations must also be a foundational consideration. A socially and gender-nuanced understanding of livelihoods, and the changes that shape livelihoods, is an important research area for supporting development interventions. In this paper, we have explored in the Langalanga case how gender has structured the distribution of labour and income in the production of shell money and jewellery over time; the role of shell money within contemporary livelihoods; the involvement of women and men in shell money manufacture and marketing; and the ways gender norms have shaped shell money value chains within wider livelihoods portfolio.

Shell money has been central to Langalanga economies and identity since people first settled there. It enabled people who did not have access to land for food gardens to make a living in the marginal lagoon and islet environment, along with fishing. It was part of their trading activities and part of what distinguished Langalanga as a people. Shell money has remained key to prestige and authority within Langalanga communities, now as part of the cash income that became more important through the colonial and independence era. This was important in a material as well as a symbolic sense, with shell money being one of the main activities in family livelihood portfolios, along with fishing, boat building, and trading. A potential limitation is resource decline with overharvesting of the shells used. So far, the limitation has been avoided by buying in shells from elsewhere, but if those stocks are also overfished, scarcity and increased prices could damage the shell money economy.

<sup>3</sup> This echoes findings from research on economic empowerment initiatives in Melanesia, where improving women's incomes has in some cases led to increased conflict within families, including violence against women and women's money being stolen by men family members (Eves and Crawford 2014).

The gender division of labour has changed somewhat over time in Langalanga livelihoods, including the ways in which men and women are involved in sourcing shells, crafting beads and strings and marketing shell money and jewellery. One of the most significant changes in shell money as shown in the literature and our data is that women have become more active in the retail trade node of the value chain in recent decades. A related change is that in some cases, women are taking more of a leading role in family income generation, including through taking over shell money marketing. These shifts have occurred through a complex interplay of wider social, economic and environmental changes, including the advent of a cash economy; the influence of Christianity and colonialism; periods of conflict and peace; resource access and decline; and changing demand patterns for shell money and jewellery.

Whilst the gendered division of labour has shifted, however, norms about gender roles have not always easily accommodated these changes, putting social pressure on women who break norms and affecting their relationships. Women running businesses, controlling their own income and travelling away from home to trade may face social disapproval. Moreover, there are tensions between norms in pursuing shell money livelihoods. Looking after one's family, especially feeding family members and caring for children, is a strong norm for women. Women trading shell money may be aiming to fulfil this role, but at the same time are doing something that within living memory has been men's work, and are contravening norms about being 'good' women by travelling away from home. Pressure from contravening social norms also arises in choices to conduct business along more capitalist lines with wage labour and refusing requests to share income with relatives, as opposed to utilising a business model based on *wantok* reciprocity.

An important finding from this inquiry is that the relative importance, types of engagement and gendered roles in shell money livelihoods are diverse. The differences arising from gender in shell money livelihoods are most pronounced between family C—with a business model based on *wantok* reciprocity for labour and dispersing income, within which the 'women's work' of shell money is seen as a supporting activity for the 'men's work' of boat building—and family E—a single mother eschewing *wantok* reciprocity in favour of a more capitalist business model. We see differences also between some families taking an entrepreneurial approach to shell money, thinking about how to make most money, and investing profits into their family's future, and family B that had a more hand-to-mouth approach. Factors that seem to influence these trajectories include the natural capital, human capital and social capital available to different families and individuals within them. Individual personalities may also play a role. Whilst our data are not sufficient to quantifiably compare the different ways of engaging with the shell money

value chain, or the reasons families 'do' shell money in particular ways, we highlight some trends that are worthy of further exploration.

Any intervention aimed at improving livelihoods should not take a one-size-fits-all approach. Whilst some families are ready to adopt quite capitalist approaches, other families are mixing capitalism with more culturally embedded approaches to business, and yet others may be at risk of impoverishment through capitalist business development approaches. Thorough understanding of the reasons households vary in their livelihoods approaches, including gendered aspects, is a necessary foundation for devising interventions to promote development for whole communities, rather than for a few families within those communities.

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