

Gender equal fisheries

What are the challenges in the path of achieving gender equality in fisheries and what should our priorities be? This article tries to identify these in the context of SDG 5, the Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality

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Global, United Nations-led initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have the potential to highlight and give direction to human development needs by mobilizing people and resources towards common ends. But to translate these aspirations into real change in a place, a sector and for a particular group of people will require more specific mobilization than that envisaged in the rather general actions and indicators now emerging.

How are fisheries and aquaculture organisations responding to the call of the 17 SDGs? In 2016, when Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) biennial Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting addressed the SDGs for fisheries and aquaculture, they focused most attention on SDG 14—*conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*, and mentioned several other SDGs. SDG 5—*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*—was referred to only once, and that too, in the context of the Voluntary Guidelines on Small-Scale Fisheries in which gender principles are included. Is this an early sign that SDG 5 is not penetrating far into fisheries thinking and hence action?

Despite this unpromising start, the nine targets of SDG 5, related to gender equality, provide some ideas upon which fisheries gender reform could be built. To become more meaningful, however, several targets require deeper diagnosis before courses of action can be developed and fisheries-relevant indicators agreed upon. The current drafts of official SDG 5 indicators are at a level of aggregation and generality that have little direct interpretation in any particular sector. This article will look at these targets one by one.

Target 5.1: *End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere*. This target echoes the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which barely penetrated fisheries thinking. Many gender studies in fisheries and aquaculture conclude that social norms severely constrain women's inclusion and progress and recommend that gender transformative change is needed. Few studies and campaigns challenge macro-

economic choices, often made at the national level, such as modernizing fisheries and increasing production and trade, although these may stymie any attempts to end discrimination against women, even when activists are striving for gender transformative change. To end discrimination, a very broad view must be taken of the context within which discrimination is generated and how progress may be measured. Even positive discrimination may not help women, such as when they are preferred for low-cost labour in factories and service industries, but their labour is exploited. In this situation, the women's labour-force indicator would be high, but the benefits of that labour for the women would be poor.

Target 5.2: *Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation*. Although critical, this target is rarely addressed in fisheries and aquaculture activism and research. Often, even talking about women in the context of mainstream fisheries is considered bold enough. Introducing sensitive issues on violence, trafficking and sexual exploitation is avoided except in the coffee breaks or one-to-one conversations outside the official presentations and reports. Trafficking in male fisheries labour is receiving some public attention and it starting to find its way into policy, for example, through certification schemes. The time is overdue to bring out into the open fish supply chain issues on violence against women and to take action.

Related issues are women's rights to decent employment in fish value chains, including health, work safety and labour rights of employment. These are addressed in SDG 8—*promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*.

Target 5.3: *Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation*. These issues are not addressed in fish supply chains, being held even more private than the issues of Target 5.2. Commonly, the prevalence of such practices is not understood, and action left to broader societal campaigns rather than targeted sectoral efforts. In the absence of information, we do not know whether this is the appropriate approach or not.

Target 5.4: *Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate*. Unpaid work, including unpaid productive work, is a major factor in fish supply chains, yet little attention has been focused on individual and household

economics that could guide policy. As a result, there would be significant challenges involved; for example, with defining the “household” or “individual unit”; distinguishing work from non-work, and incorporating the flexibility that is needed for such non-conventional but important areas of economic analysis. This target needs much more consideration and feminist economic analysis before action can be recommended.

Target 5.5: *Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.* Indicators tend to focus on the percentage of women in managerial/senior positions, but these overlook important intermediate stages of action, such as encouraging active gender champions in different spheres of decision making, building women’s skills, setting targets, and promulgating policies and institutional changes to change the social settings, such as markets, rather than relying on women to change. The considerations of Target 5.1 are also highly relevant to achieving equal opportunities.

Target 5.6: *Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.* In some regions, fishing communities and people in fish supply chains hold the unfortunate record of having the highest HIV/AIDS rates of all occupations. Lack of reproductive education and access to reproductive health services, fish trade behaviour such as ‘sex-for-fish,’ women’s variable agency, and the migratory and itinerant nature of fishers and fish value chain workers all contribute to the high HIV/AIDS rates. Nevertheless, fishworkers’ reproductive health problems are only part of census data collection in a few locations, and there is a lack of deeper understanding.

Target 5.a: *Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.* This is a critical target but one that receives relatively little attention in fisheries, where certain rights are more difficult to define. In the case of women, often doubly disadvantaged in the landscape of resource rights, case based evidence suggests that women’s rights are most likely to advance

if women speak up and advocate for formal recognition, as in the case of the Costa Rican fishers of invertebrates; or if they perceive and create their own options, as, for example, the women working in the overtly masculine tuna port of General Santos City, Philippines, did, rather than accept formal behavioural prescriptions.. To address this target, fish value chains need major formal and informal reforms.

Target 5.b: *Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.* This is relevant to women in fisheries, for example, in markets and trading. Empowerment, however, needs to be more comprehensively defined than merely in terms of equal access to information and communication technology. Here again, the considerations outlined for Target 5.1 apply.

Target 5.c: *Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.* This is generally interpreted in terms of women’s representation in elected office, although the target seems to be much broader. The silence of much fisheries legislation on gender matters suggests that gender champions and advocates have a major challenge to get gender equality into sound policies and enforceable legislation.

In conclusion, five prospective ideas emerge from this short review of the relevance of SDG 5 to the fisheries sector. The first is that removing discrimination will require critical diagnoses of the true sources that lead to discrimination, including the consideration of national economic approaches and rights regimes, as well as social norms, coupled with a major programme aimed at incorporating gender equality provisions in fisheries legislation and policy. The second is that the time is ripe for openly addressing exploitation of and violence against women in the fisheries sector. The third is that the economics of individuals and households, flexibly defined, need to be examined to expose the intertwined issues of paid, unpaid, care and domestic work in fisheries. Fourth, measuring women’s leadership should not be restricted just to counting women leaders but should also take into account the presence of gender champions and the means for encouraging women’s greater personal and collective agency. Fifth, in fisheries, sexual and reproductive health matters need greater attention. ❏

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