

# Critical routes

## Women fishers, shrimp peelers and mollusk workers in Costa Rica identify priority areas for the recognition and formalisation of their work

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Costa Rica is a country with great marine biodiversity and has an important cultural heritage in its coastal marine areas. However, recognition and opportunities for decent work for the country's small-scale fishers and mollusk gatherers, especially for women who work mainly in pre- and post-fishing activities, are scarce.

The country does not have a fishing census; therefore, the information on the number of fisherpeople in the country's various fishing categories is not up-to-date. There is even less information that can be used to analyse and recognise the role and importance of women in the small-scale artisanal fishing sector and value chains. Women contribute not only to small-scale artisanal fishing but also to various types of pre- and post-capture activities, such as processing and marketing of fishery products – activities which are pillars of support for the sector but continue to be poorly recognised.

Given this situation, in 2019, a study was carried out to support the visibility of women in the different value chains of Costa Rica's fisheries. This was a first step towards formalising and seeking dignified and decent work opportunities and articulating cultural identities related to the sea within the framework of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). The initiative, developed by CoopeSoliDar R.L. was commissioned and financed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (National Institute of Women - INAMU).

The work was carried out with effective participation of fisherwomen, both the leaders and members of Red de Áreas Marinas de Pesca Responsable (Network of Marine Areas of Responsible Fishing and Marine Territories of Life), who formed a working group together with the technical team of CoopeSoliDar RL. The joint team developed a questionnaire containing 63 questions related to the situation of fisherwomen in the family, work, socialisation, cultural links with the sea, violence in the communities (answers being optional), institutional relationships, as well as proposals, dreams and challenges for the present and future.

The team visited 45 communities from the Pacific and Caribbean coast of Costa Rica

and met with 486 women from different value chains representing diverse marine and cultural contexts. Mollusk processors, fillet workers, shrimp peelers, clam processors, artisanal fishers, among others, were interviewed along both coasts of the country, the Pacific and the Caribbean. We discuss here some of the important study findings.

In the small-scale artisanal fishing chain, the majority of women (62 per cent) were between 31 and 60 years of age. Many of these women are therefore at a stage of life where economic autonomy and social security for retirement are important questions. However, most of the work they do is not covered by decent retirement options.

This is in stark contrast to their multiple and sustained contributions to a range of different pre-fishing and post-fishing activities. Women not only carry out the same tasks as male fishermen, but also shoulder the additional responsibility of reproductive tasks.

The study also reveals significant participation of fisherwomen in the various local organizations that revitalise productive actions in their coastal marine territories, ranging from supporting community members, including older adults and children, to engaging with community welfare organizations. There is a significant participation of women in artisanal fishing organizations; however, their participation in decision making spaces is not as frequent.

In the family sphere, half of the women interviewed revealed that they experienced family violence in the community or within their families, expressed in different ways, from physical to verbal and or emotional violence. These women attributed the violence to the use of alcohol and drugs, exposure to football games during closed fishing seasons, various forms of stress, and male chauvinism.

Since the study explored diverse value chains within small-scale artisanal fisheries (shrimp, mollusks and scale fishing), the findings reveal an enormous diversity of practices associated with several little known and studied women's productive activities in Costa Rica.

In all the communities studied, the activity of artisanal fishing is linked to aspects of identity that come from previous generations of women. This traditional knowledge is of vital importance in terms of the conservation



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and sustainability of local marine resources and therefore contribute to sustainable fisheries at the national level.

Women linked to the sea in Costa Rica are still at incipient levels of organization. They perceive that they need to strengthen their organizational processes, become more visible as a sector and gain access to opportunities for recognition, formalisation, improvement of their working conditions, infrastructure and fishing gear, as well as to have decent work in these value chains.

Earnings of women in activities linked to artisanal fishing are generally very low. In most cases, women do not perceive significant changes in their income irrespective of whether the times are bad, regular and good. Variations are few, and according to the data, incomes for the majority are well below the stipulated minimum wages in the country.

Practically all women in the study reportedly invest their earnings to fulfill the basic needs of the family and do not have money left over for leisure and recreation, personal health, education, training and other interests. On the other hand, there are very few opportunities to access institutional care, which is why women of reproductive ages choose to leave their children in the care of relatives or are forced to take them to their places of work in fishing.

Women in most value chains face high occupational health risks. They are exposed to

infections, excess sun, various insect bites in mangroves and coasts, cuts, encounters with wildlife and a variety of diseases.

In general, much of the training received is not aligned to the traditional knowledge they have. Also, not all women who fish, glean mollusks or peel shrimp have a permit or licence that supports the formalisation of their activities.

In all the value chains studied, women were found to be doing at least two or three types of work, including reproductive labour, which was found to be the primary responsibility of the majority of the interviewees. Women do the major work within the family in terms of care giving, preparing food to take to work and taking care of children and the elderly.

In general, the study found that women aspire to a fair recognition of their work in artisanal fishing. The issues of market access, price improvement, access to collection centres, land tenure and real participation in decision making by organizations are aspects requiring urgent attention.

The issue of violence against women is also a concern. While not all women felt confident to discuss the issue, they felt that it needed to be addressed comprehensively, with due attention paid to the consequences of violence and strategies to prevent violence.

With regard to the presence of women in organizations of coastal marine communities,

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the study revealed lower participation in rural areas and higher participation among populations with urban characteristics. Many women felt that there should be greater and more efficient inter-institutional coordination in response to both the demands of the sector and to the specific conditions of women in their different life cycles and aspirations.

The study made the following action recommendations to authorities and institutions in the fisheries sector with respect to the lives and livelihoods of women in fishing communities:

**Action 1:** Recognition of the contribution of women's work to small-scale fisheries.

**Action 2:** Recognition of the diversity of work in the different value chains and in the different

marine-coastal contexts in which women participate.

**Action 3:** Addressing the issue of access to land and sea.

**Action 4:** Strengthening the issues related to the organization, promotion of networks and effective public policies with respect to the interests of women fishers.

**Action 5:** Proposing strategies for changing power relations and addressing violence

**Action 6:** Advancing actions aimed at well being and integral health.

**Action 7:** Promoting linkage between gender and value chains in artisanal fishing.

**Action 8:** Building a communication and knowledge generation strategy. ❏