

Fishing Out the Invisible

One in two seafood workers is a woman, yet they remain invisible, unrecognized and unacknowledged by the powers that call the shots in the seafood industry

GLOBEFISH, the unit in the Fisheries Department of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) responsible for information on international fish trade has just (May 2015) released a first-of-its-kind report on “the role of women in the seafood industry”.

This worldwide desktop study presents, for the first time, what is known, and what remains to be investigated in this crucial component of the seafood industry. The research, carried out in early 2015, explores and sheds light on a specific aspect of the seafood industry that has been largely ignored by decisionmakers: women participate in all segments of the seafood industry, including fishing, farming, trading and selling, monitoring and administration. The widespread lack of consideration for their role and work in the seafood industry is, in many respects, disadvantageous and ultimately bars them from fully and equitably participating in the sector’s growth.

What do we know about women in the industry? Where information is available, in both developing and developed countries, it can be seen that women’s participation is constrained or affected by strong cultural rules, robust societal conventions and even, in some cases, by discriminatory laws. The seafood industry is ruled by a patriarchy paradigm, where hierarchy, authority, power, competition, development, control of human and natural resources and domination of others are shaped by males for their benefit and welfare. The conditions of participation of both genders in the industry and related services

are organized according to these rules at all levels, from workers to decisionmakers.

The knowledge and understanding of the very complex distribution of roles, power, access to resources and profits between genders vary greatly between regions and industry sectors. On a global scale, quantitative and qualitative data on the participation of women is sparse and when it exists, it may be of poor quality and only covers some segments of the industry.

During the Fifth Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Conference

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that took place in Lucknow, India, in 2014, where about 80 seafood gender specialists gathered, the need for more research in the field was advocated by all. The critical lack of gender expertise in the seafood industry was also acknowledged.

Gender-disaggregated data

The GLOBEFISH report examines the level of information and knowledge in six countries (Republic of Croatia, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the French Republic, the Republic of Iceland, the Republic of India and the Republic of Senegal), describing the role of women in the seafood industry, not precisely their situation. What is known and documented? Does gender-disaggregated data over the full employment spectrum in the

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seafood industry and sociological, anthropological and economic studies on the role and power distribution between the sexes exist? This limited research provides evidence that the quality of data varies greatly between countries and, interestingly enough, is not linked to the level of economic development. Developing countries like India and Senegal, for instance, offer rather good records because these important fishing and aquaculture nations have received the attention of gender-sensitive development aid agencies. In contrast, the participation of women in the industry is still poorly documented and researched in most developed countries, such as France and Croatia.

In the table below, we suggest a tentative classification of women's participation in the various steps of the global seafood business environment. Although it is only of indicative value, it shows that the concentration of women varies greatly by segment.

We see that women are rare in industrial fishing, in professional

organizations, at leadership levels while they are numerous in artisanal aquaculture, onshore fishing, and in seafood processing at the workers' level. They are active in environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). What shapes this particular social distribution of roles, between men and women?

The voices of men are valued more than the voices of women. Women are barred from some seafood-related jobs, such as going to sea on board fishing vessels. In some countries, women are expected to stay at home and should not be involved in so-called masculine activities such as aquaculture. They may be deprived of ownership rights, and thus hindered from running fish-farming businesses, or they may not be allowed to access finances and insurance services. Consequently, their limited access to capital constraints their capacity to invest in modern and competitive technology in fishing, farming, processing, storing fish, and hampers them from upgrading their knowledge and skills.

Concentration of Women in the Seafood Industry, by Sector

	No/low	Medium	High
Industrial fishing (high capital-intensive)	X		
Industrial aquaculture (high capital-intensive)	X		
Professional organizations	X		
Fisheries management	X		
Leadership level	X		
Small-scale fishing (low capital-intensive)		X	
Fisheries support activities (ashore)		X	
Ex-vessel selling and marketing		X	
Administration		X	
Quality inspection		X	
Researchers, marine and social sciences		X	
Source of knowledge other than scientific		X	
Onshore aquatic items collecting			X
Small-scale aquaculture (low capital-intensive)			X
Seafood processing			X
Environmental activists			X
Seafood purchase for households			X

In all countries, the time devoted for caring for children and the elderly, and for domestic tasks, such as tidying up the house, collecting, buying and preparing food, is perceived as a natural duty that falls on women's shoulders. This adds—depending on the country and the position of the women—one to four hours onto their working days, compared to their male counterparts. This creates a double negative impact on women's participation in the business. The time devoted to these tasks is not spent on productive work, and the money spent on food, care and education cannot be saved to be spent in productive activities. The lack of time may prevent women from taking opportunities to improve their knowledge and upgrade their qualifications and skills.

The gender pay gap between men and women occupying equivalent positions applies also to the seafood industry. A study conducted for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on the People's Republic of Bangladesh shrimp value chain exemplifies the differences in earnings between women and men.

Relative Earnings of Women Compared with those of their Male Counterparts

Activity	Percentage
Catching, sorting fry	64
Repairing ponds, undertaking casual agricultural labour	82
Processing plants—packing section	72
Processing plants—cooking/breeding section	60

Source: FAO, 2012

The participation of women in fisheries and aquaculture activities as non-declared, non-paid support personnel to the family business is common worldwide.

Conditions may be improving in some places; in many others, however, researchers have detected signs of deterioration due to global

changes. Research carried out on this topic indicates that women in coastal areas depending on seafood as a source of revenue or a source of food are particularly affected by these changes. Globalization and its hunger for cheap inputs including human labour, the widespread decline in marine resources, the deterioration of marine coastal habitats and climate change effects, among other events, generate severe consequences on fragile populations, among which women are numerous.

An analysis of the impact of trade liberalization on women working in India's export-oriented seafood industry reveals that a large proportion of the female workers interviewed confessed that the work environment has improved significantly in the past years. Upgraded safety, sanitary and working conditions have been implemented by industrialists as a response to the stringent demand of importers. But international markets not only impose new working standards; they stimulate competition between suppliers who are forced to reduce their production costs to maintain their competitiveness. Hiring on contract gives more flexibility to employers but also creates more job insecurity for workers. This has intensified the casualization of the labour force, which is paid at the lowest possible level, with limited or no social and health benefits. According to the analysis, 88 per cent of the women workforce was employed as temporary staff. This concerns both men and women, but post-harvest jobs are mainly executed by women. Furthermore, such casual contracted jobs exclude advancement opportunities, skill upgrading and empowerment.

New fishing practices

The decline in marine stocks has caused the adoption of new fishing practices, including moving to alternative areas, further from the coast or further from the sites where the fishers live, and buying new fishing gear. But, in many cases,

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Women collecting oysters cultivated in Qualidia Lagoon, Morocco.
Women are rare in industrial fishing, while they are numerous in artisanal aquaculture

women do not have the necessary resources to adapt, namely, capital to upgrade their fishing equipment (engine, new gears) and to preserve the fish quality (ice, boxes), and the time to get to the more distant sites. Furthermore, they cannot afford to move too far away from their homes since they have to take care of the family.

Despite our diligent research, we have not found one single in-service initiative addressing the gender inequality or a programme directed to the promotion or empowerment of women initiated by private corporations in the seafood industry. The only positive initiatives we could spot had been initiated by global or regional organizations, development agencies and NGOs.

For instance in the Asia-Pacific region, the biennial Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF), by the *Women in Fisheries* publication of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the *Yemaya* newsletter of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), contribute to raise attention on gender issues in fisheries and aquaculture. The entire literature on empowerment and career stimulation in any industry emphasizes the key impact that role models play. Precisely because men hold tight to all positions in the public sphere, charismatic and successful

women in the seafood industry are seldom visible, and their inspirational impact remains limited.

The initiative of the “Aquaculture without Frontiers” women’s network that launched, in December 2014, a “Woman of the Month” award is to be lauded. The first “Woman of the Month” was Jennifer Cobcroft, BSc, PhD, and a Research Fellow at the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania. The second nominated “Woman of the Month” was Anna Mercy, professor at the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies, India, who was chosen for her long commitment to promoting aquaculture.

For some 30 years now, researchers and development experts have produced evidence of the crucial role of women in fisheries, and the gender-specific constraints they face, but this knowledge has hardly ever been disseminated among seafood professionals. Research has been carried out, reports have been published, and debates have been organized on the issue of discrimination against women, but in the seafood industry, the level of awareness about the role played by women is still very limited among seafood stakeholders. The GLOBEFISH report primarily aims to increase awareness among business leaders and policymakers, enlarge their knowledge and sensitize them to the value that women bring to the seafood industry. It also encourages them to ask, each time they develop a new project or a policy: “Have we not overlooked women?”

For more

www.globefish.org/vol-119-the-role-of-women-in-the-seafood-industry.html

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