

A sea of opportunities

A dialogue series conducted in Latin America during the pandemic explored ways to promote gender equality in the fisheries sector

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Sustainable fisheries are vital to achieving food security, alleviating poverty and increasing economic growth worldwide. In coastal countries, seafood represents up to 70 percent of protein intake and is an essential source of vitamins, fats and minerals. Globally, more than 40 million people work in fisheries-related activities, with an estimated 90 percent of them operating on a small scale. In the fisheries context, an estimated 2.3 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are directly or indirectly engaged in fishing activities. The relevance of small-scale fisheries in the region becomes clear when it is recognized that they contribute a little over 10 percent of global catches.

Women have a major role in the fisheries sector, since, if post-harvest activities are considered, they represent about 50 percent of the global workforce. In Latin America alone it is estimated that women represent 30 percent of those employed in fisheries. Present throughout the fisheries value chain, women are involved in catching, processing, marketing, distribution

and leadership. However, persistent gender inequalities prevent their full participation in economic opportunities and decision-making, which ultimately constrains the potential of the sector. Furthermore, a limited understanding of women's unique roles and contributions leads to ignoring their interests and needs in policies and programmes, with a consequent impact on sustainable development outcomes.

Numerous studies and experiences confirm that reducing gender inequalities and addressing gender mainstreaming in conservation, adaptation and resilience efforts in fisheries and marine conservation lead to improved governance and sustainability outcomes. Gender inequalities are rooted in legal and social norms, including unequal access to education, economic opportunities and decision-making and other social factors, such as age and ethnicity, that dictate how women and men access, use and control coastal marine resources.

In line with the 2030 Agenda and the call to action for gender equality issued by member

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Small-scale fisherwoman at Barra de Santiago, El Salvador. Panelists pointed out the positive impacts that women's involvement in conservation projects and sustainable fishing



Fisherwoman transporting fish in Cayuco, El Embarcadero, El Salvador. By the end of the three dialogues, more than 3000 participants from fishing cooperatives, government institutions, academia, and civil society organizations dedicated to promoting gender equality had been able to connect through the various streaming platforms

states at the United Nations Conference on Oceans to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14: “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development held in June 2017” as well as SDG 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, the Specialized Regional Organization of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector of the Central American Isthmus (OSPESCA) attached to the General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SICA), the International Union for

Conservation of Nature (IUCN), within the framework of the Regional Coastal Biodiversity Project, and Community and Biodiversity (COBI) through its Gender Equality at Sea program, organized three virtual dialogues on the Gender Dimension in Fisheries, thus contributing to the strengthening of gender equality in the sector.

A notable aspect of these dialogues is that they took place during the COVID-19 pandemic - a time of heightened vulnerability everywhere but particularly so in the fisheries sector. A recent study conducted in Mexico by

Lopez-Ercilla and colleagues shows that during the period March to June 2020, nine out of ten people in small-scale fisheries reported market closures and price drops. During this period, market prices fell and fishing declined greatly. However, women and men involved in fishery activities in Latin America were at the forefront of the response and recovery effort, despite the prevailing difficulties and uncertainties.

The series consisted of three dialogues. The first dialogue, 'Women and the Sea: Beyond Fisheries', provided an overview of priority objectives to address persistent gender challenges in the fisheries sector in the Latin America region, with a focus on Central America, and their linkages to the broader environment and sustainable development agenda. During the event the publication 'Advancing Gender in The Environment: Gender in Fisheries—A Sea of Opportunities – IUCN' by genderandenvironment.org was launched in Spanish. The dialogue stressed the need to collect sex disaggregated data in the sector in order to have a better understanding of women's participation in fish value chains and also to better inform fisheries policies and programmes.

The second dialogue, 'Good practices to promote the equal participation of women in marine-coastal zones', focused on initiatives from Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. These experiences described how a project like the 'Regional Coastal Biodiversity Project: a regional initiative for the management of coastal marine ecosystems in Central America', implemented by IUCN and local partners, and funded by USAID, is integrating the gender perspective in its communication, governance, conservation, small grants and key actions, in order to promote gender equality. Another presentation by CoopeSolidar emphasized the need to recognize women's leadership and collective action the fisheries sector; women's knowledge on biodiversity and its uses along the various value chains, as well as to empower women economically by identifying ways to achieve recognized and decent work for women and young women.

The event noted the urgent need for the fair and equitable distribution of benefits so as to acknowledge women's contributions both in the generation of scientific and traditional knowledge as well as in recognition of the links between women's work and the areas of climate change; economic and food security; and health and well-being. The event also underscored the importance of women's participation in public policy making to ensure the sustainable use and conservation of resources, as well as to ensure that development is compliant with human rights in the sector. At the end of the event,

participants identified the lessons learned and the challenges involved in implementing the gender approach in fishery projects.

The third and final dialogue, 'Voices of women fisherwomen: contribution to better management of fisheries resources', allowed fisherwomen from Latin American fishing communities to share their achievements, challenges and the lessons they had learned in their journey towards equal participation in the management of marine-coastal resources. In this dialogue, fisherwomen from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico highlighted elements such as the common good, teamwork and the alliance with civil society organizations, academia, and government institutions, which have been key to achieving gender equality.

Panelists pointed out the positive impacts that women's involvement in conservation projects, sustainable fishing and citizen science have had. An example of citizen science is the efforts of the fishing cooperative Mujeres Pescadoras del Manglar, in Mexico, who have actively participated in the processing of biometric data and physicochemical variables of the Lagunas de Chacahua National Park to improve the conditions of the mangrove ecosystem, which is essential for the survival of the species they fish. Thanks to these efforts, the fisherwomen have seen a recovery of their main fishery (*Mytella charruana*). Finally, the fisherwomen closed the session by calling for gender equality, and encouraging women to continue their involvement, despite all barriers, in the management of fishery resources.

These dialogues allowed the participation of fishermen and fisherwomen from Latin America as well as organizations and professionals working in the fisheries sector. Individuals and organizations working on women's empowerment and gender equality in the sector were also able to attend the dialogues. By the end of the three dialogues, more than 3000 participants from fishing cooperatives, government institutions, academia, and civil society organizations dedicated to promoting gender equality had been able to connect through the various streaming platforms.

In Latin America, the representation of women in leadership positions is low. Although the characteristics of each community determines the nature of women's status in that community, one of the main factors responsible for the absence of women in marine and coastal resource management is that their contributions to the fishing sector are invisible, ignored, and unrecognized. Therefore, the participation of different actors in this type of dialogue is essential to achieving gender equality in the fishing, aquaculture, and marine conservation projects of Latin America. ❏

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