

Women in Fisheries: The Challenges They Still Face

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Abstract

Women play a crucial role in global fisheries, especially in post-harvest and small-scale operations, yet they face persistent challenges such as limited resource access, gender inequality, and poor working conditions. Despite progress through policy reforms and grassroots initiatives, systemic barriers remain. This article highlights key issues, success stories, and recommendations to promote gender equity in the fisheries sector.

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1. Introduction

A. The global fisheries

The global fisheries and aquaculture sector plays a vital role in supporting livelihoods and ensuring food security for millions. As of 2020, global fish production reached approximately 179 million tonnes, with aquaculture contributing around 49% to this total, according to the FAO 2022 report. An estimated 820 million people depend on fisheries for their income and nutrition, with small-scale fisheries comprising nearly 90% of the sector's workforce. These small-scale operations are central to the economic and social fabric of coastal and inland communities worldwide.

B. Role of women in fisheries – often overlooked but critical

Women play an essential yet often invisible role in the fisheries value chain. They make up nearly 50% of the global workforce involved in fisheries-related activities, particularly in post-harvest tasks such as processing, drying, sorting, and marketing. Despite this, only 15% of women are

persistent gender segregation within the sector. Much of women's labor remains unrecognized in national statistics, as many work in informal, unpaid, or seasonal roles. The World Bank highlights that women in fisheries significantly contribute to household incomes, community well-being, and the sustainability of resources, yet continue to face institutional barriers and limited access to resources and decision-making. Their contributions are critical for the resilience and growth of the sector, but they remain marginalized in policy discussions and development strategies.



2. History and Current Participation

A. Traditional roles of women in fisheries (pre- and post-harvest)

Women have historically contributed to fisheries through a wide range of activities, mainly in pre-harvest tasks like net mending, bait preparation, and gear maintenance, and in post-harvest roles such as fish drying, cleaning, processing, marketing, and distribution. These tasks are critical to the sector but often go unpaid or underpaid. In many coastal and riverine communities, women have been central to preserving traditional knowledge and ensuring food supply through subsistence fishing and aquaculture in backyard ponds, estuaries, and inland water bodies.



B. Statistics on women's participation globally and regionally

Globally, women make up about 47% of the fisheries workforce, according to FAO 2022. In capture fisheries, their participation drops to around 15%, with most women concentrated in post-harvest processing, where they account for nearly 90% of the labor. In Southeast Asia, women represent over 60% of fish processing workers, while in West Africa, they dominate small-scale fish trading and

drying. These figures highlight the gendered division of labor, with women often working in lower-income, less secure roles.

C. Evolving roles and recognition of women's contributions

Women's roles in fisheries are expanding beyond traditional boundaries. There is growing evidence of women engaging in small-scale aquaculture, fisheries management, coastal conservation, and even boat ownership. Programs supported by UN Women, FAO, and various NGOs have promoted capacity building, financial access, and policy advocacy. Despite progress, gender disparities remain in areas such as decision-making, resource control, and recognition in official data systems. Greater visibility and policy support are essential for advancing gender equity in fisheries.

3. Key Challenges Women Still Face

A. Limited Access to Resources and Opportunities

- *Land and fishing rights*

Women rarely hold legal titles to land or access rights to fishing grounds. A World Bank study (2021) found that in many coastal regions, less than 20% of women engaged in fisheries have secure tenure over fishing or aquaculture spaces.

- *Credit and financing barriers*

Only 10% of women in fisheries access formal credit, according to FAO 2022. Collateral requirements and lack of financial literacy limit their ability to invest in equipment or scale operations.

- *Training and education gaps*

Gender gaps persist in technical training and extension services. Women receive only 5–10% of available fisheries-related

training in some regions, affecting their productivity and ability to adopt new technologies.

B. Gender-Based Discrimination and Inequality

- *Male-dominated decision-making structures*

Women are often excluded from local fisheries committees and cooperatives. A 2020 FAO report showed that less than 12% of board positions in fisheries organizations are held by women.

- *Unequal pay and lack of recognition*

Women in post-harvest roles earn 30–50% less than men for similar work. Their unpaid labor remains uncoun- ted in national fisheries data and GDP contributions.

- *Underrepresentation in leadership roles*

Despite growing participation, women hold less than 10% of leadership roles in fisheries ministries, unions, or producer organizations, limiting their influence on policy.

C. Poor Working Conditions

- *Informal employment and lack of legal protections*

Over 70% of women in the fisheries sector work informally, without contracts, insurance, or labor rights. This increases their economic vulnerability and exposure to exploitation.

- *Exposure to health risks and unsafe environments*

Processing work often involves long hours, use of chemicals, and inadequate protective equipment, leading to chronic health issues. Sanitation facilities are often lacking at landing and processing sites.

- *Lack of maternity protection and family support policies*

Most fisheries workplaces do not provide maternity leave, child care, or nursing support. This forces many women to leave the workforce during critical family years, reducing long-term income potential.

D. Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

- *Increased vulnerability due to dependence on marine resources*

Women in small-scale fisheries rely heavily on nearshore resources, which are declining due to overfishing and climate impacts. Rising sea levels and unpredictable weather directly affect their livelihoods.

- *Marginalization in climate adaptation and resilience strategies*

Climate response plans often overlook women's knowledge and roles. According to a UN Women report (2021), fewer than 15% of national climate strategies in coastal countries include gender-responsive measures for the fisheries sector.

4. Success Stories and Progress Made

A. Case studies of women-led initiatives in fisheries

In Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Nadu Women Fish Vendors' Federation helped women access cold storage facilities and transportation through collective bargaining, reducing spoilage and increasing income by 35%.

In Odisha, the Mission Shakti program enabled women's self-help groups (SHGs) to manage fish ponds under lease agreements, improving local fish supply and raising household incomes by over 25% within three years.

In Kerala, the Matsyafed (Kerala State Co-operative Federation for Fisheries Development Ltd.) supported women in launching small-scale fish processing and value-added product units, creating over 5,000 jobs for fisherwomen across coastal districts.

In Maharashtra, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) trained women in ornamental fish breeding and marketing, leading to the formation of micro-enterprises with monthly incomes rising from ₹2,000 to ₹8,000 per participant.

B. Role of NGOs, cooperatives, and international organizations

NGOs such as WorldFish and Oxfam have provided women with access to microcredit, training, and market linkages.

Women's fisheries cooperatives in Senegal and Cambodia have enabled collective bargaining and improved access to cold storage and transportation, raising average earnings by 30–50%.

FAO and UN Women have jointly supported gender audits and capacity building, reaching over 25 countries with gender-sensitive fisheries programs.

C. Government policies and gender-inclusive programs

The Maldives introduced a national gender strategy in fisheries, promoting equal access to grants, training, and representation in fisheries councils.

Chile implemented the Gender Equality Seal in fisheries enterprises, increasing women's participation in leadership roles by 35% within five years.

Mozambique's national fisheries plan includes targets for women's inclusion in resource co-management, contributing to improved stock recovery and social outcomes.

5. Recommendations for Change

A. Policy reforms to ensure gender equity in the sector

- *Strengthening legal rights and access*

Laws should guarantee women's access to fishing rights, land, and marine resources. FAO recommends integrating gender equality clauses in national fisheries policies to improve access and control over resources.

- *Ensuring equal labor protections*

Formal recognition of women's roles in fisheries must be backed by labor laws that ensure equal pay, safe working conditions, and maternity benefits across the value chain.

Table: Policy Reforms to Ensure Gender Equity

Policy Area	Reform Description	Impact/Outcome	Supporting Data or Example
Legal Rights & Resource Access	Enact laws that grant women equal access to land, fishing grounds, and licenses	Strengthens women's control over resources and income	FAO reports <15% of women have secure tenure in fisheries
Labor Protection Laws	Include women in labor laws with maternity benefits, fair wages, and safe conditions	Reduces exploitation, improves retention in the sector	ILO data: 70% of women in fisheries are in informal, unprotected roles

Gender-Sensitive Policy Integration	Mainstream gender in national fisheries strategies and budgets	Aligns policies with real needs of women across the value chain	2022 FAO gender audit shows only 30% of countries have such policies
Access to Finance & Markets	Promote credit schemes, subsidies, and women-focused cooperatives	Boosts entrepreneurship and scaling of women-led fish businesses	Microfinance has raised female fish vendors' income by 30–50%
Quota for Leadership Participation	Set minimum quotas for women in fisheries councils and decision-making bodies	Improves representation and inclusive policy development	Countries with gender quotas show 25–35% higher women's involvement

B. Capacity building and education for women

- *Expanding access to training and technology*

Targeted skill-building programs can close the gender gap. Data from WorldFish shows that women receiving aquaculture training increased yields by up to 50%.

- *Financial literacy and entrepreneurship*

Workshops on finance, business planning, and digital tools help women scale their enterprises. Microfinance programs have led to a 30% rise in female-led fish businesses in some Southeast Asian regions.

C. Inclusion of women in fisheries governance and decision-making

- *Representation in leadership structures*

Women should be included in fisheries committees, cooperatives, and national policy bodies. Countries with gender quotas, like Norway, report higher compliance with sustainable practices and improved resource outcomes.

- *Building women's leadership capacity*

Leadership programs tailored for rural and coastal women have proven effective. In

West Africa, such programs increased women's participation in fisheries governance by over 25%.

D. Public awareness and advocacy

- *Challenging gender stereotypes*

Media campaigns and community engagement can shift perceptions about women's capabilities in the sector. Educational outreach has reduced gender bias in fishing communities across Latin America.

- *Promoting data and research on women in fisheries*

Investing in gender-disaggregated data helps in policy planning. FAO reports that over 70% of countries still lack accurate data on women's contributions to fisheries, hindering effective reforms.

Conclusion

Women are vital to fisheries yet face systemic barriers. Ensuring equity through policy, education, and inclusion is essential for sustainable development, economic growth, and resilient coastal communities.

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