

Gender inequalities and the path forward

A survey among seafood professionals, while revealing gender inequalities across the seafood industry in most countries, also provides pointers for positive change.

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Several research studies and debates have addressed the issue of discrimination against women in the seafood industry. All segments of this industry, including fishing, aquaculture, seafood processing and all related services, have evidenced that the participation of women is constrained by strong cultural rules, robust societal conventions, and even, in some cases, by discriminatory laws. Women play an important role in all segments of the seafood industry, yet are invisible. They are efficient workers, yet most often underpaid. They are excluded from most decision making spheres. They have little or no access to resources allowing them to face adverse external events, as they do not receive the same public support as men. In addition, ongoing global changes including the demand for cheap inputs, the widespread decline in marine resources, the deterioration of marine habitats and the impact of climate changes, further affect already fragile populations, to which many women belong.

In order to complement this understanding of the role of women in fisheries, the International Organisation for Women in the

Seafood Industry (WSI) sought to hear the perception of seafood professionals, and their opinions regarding possible corrective measures. In 2017, WSI launched a survey asking seafood professionals to share their opinion on the crucial issue of the level of gender equality and inclusiveness in the seafood industry.

Between September and December 2017, WSI put out an online survey asking male and female seafood professionals to express their views about the situation of women in the industry, to talk about their experience and to share their views on how changes could be driven. A total of 695 professionals filled an online questionnaire titled 'Female/Male Inequalities in the Seafood Industry', of which 29 per cent were males and 71 per cent females. With three quarters of respondents originating in the northern hemisphere, the results reflect more accurately the situation of women in developed countries.

A primary finding was that over one in two seafood professionals considered this industry is gender unequal. Discriminations, unfavourable work conditions for women, deep-seated prejudices, inequality of opportunity and difficulty in accessing more senior positions were reported. 56 per cent of respondents felt that the sector is inequitable with regard to gender; 58 per cent (65 per cent among women) indicated

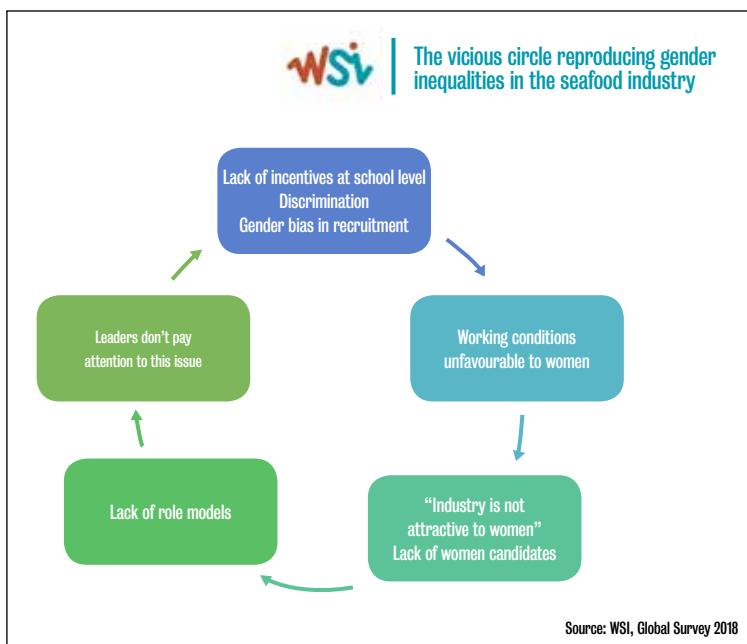
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that gender inequalities are unrecognised; and 80 per cent respondents considered the sector is ‘unattractive’ to women. The survey revealed a strong gap in perception between men and women. 61 per cent of the women respondents, as against only 44 per cent men considered the industry not gender-equal. Fifty-two per cent of women said that the problem is not even recognised within the industry.

Situations of inequality have been reported from all parts of the world, with the exception of Scandinavia. Professionals from this region have the strongest perception of equality and gender fairness, fully coherent with the macro gender indices which rank Denmark, Iceland and Norway at the top of countries closest to full gender equality.

Work-family balance and flexible work practise were found to be among the top barriers to gender equality at work. In many work places, maternity was still seen as a problem that supposedly carried economic losses for the companies concerned. This vision about pregnancy and motherhood resulted in mechanics of discrimination which ended up penalising women.

The non-gender inclusive character of this industry was reinforced by its old-fashioned and male dominated milieu. This environment added difficulties for women who had to conform to rules originally made by men for men. The survey found that the barriers to equal participation by women did not operate separately from each other; rather they stimulated each other creating a vicious and reinforcing circle that shaped gender characteristics and interactions among professionals in the seafood industry. The vicious circle is reproduced below:



From the analysis of WSI’s survey results, three steps emerged as possible efficient tools for breaking the vicious circle of gender inequality: raising consciousness of stakeholders so that they understand what is at stake; engaging men in this conversation; and encouraging progressive actions at the workplace.

First, in order to raise consciousness, the issue needs to be recognised, and responsibilities need to be owned by stakeholders.

Second, it is essential to bring men into the conversation for two reasons. The challenge should not be viewed as only a women’s issue but as a gender issue where balanced relationships between the two genders contributes to a progressive environment. Further, as decision makers, men are in the best position to influence the business environment. Finally, the survey revealed a strong gap in perception between men and women, between those directly concerned and others less concerned. There is an urgent need for a diagnosis shared by all professional organisations (fisher cooperatives, trade unions, professional organisations). Interestingly, the responses of male executives depended on their personal situation: if they had close female relatives in the industry, such as daughters, they were more likely to be open to the discussion.

Third, in order to stimulate change, dialogues on gender equality in the seafood industry should be stimulated to create consciousness, to bring information, and share good practices and progressive initiatives. All stakeholders including international organisations, national institutions, private corporates, professional associations, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to be around the table and address the gender equality issue in a pragmatic and constructive way. Many NGOs in developing countries fight relentlessly to improve the situation of women and the well-being of their communities. The results of the WSI survey indicate the debate is awaited in the northern hemisphere to ensure equal access to women in all spheres; and this debate in turn will influence discourse in the South.

Introducing the changes along these lines requires expertise, time, money, and, more crucially, the change in attitude among decision makers that gender equality will benefit their organisations. Unfortunately, calls to social justice do not seem to be strong enough drivers to propel changes.

This is where further work needs to be done by WSI and other organisations who want to push the seafood industry on a more progressive path, and to make this feminist dream of equality in the seafood industry, a reality.

The full document is available in English, French and Spanish at <https://wsi-asso.org/wsi-reports/>