

Pandemic outcomes

Women in the small scale fishing sector in Mexico are key drivers ensuring food security and community wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have surpassed all imaginable scenarios. The global crisis moves fast and changes quickly, hence forcing people to adapt and navigate through uncertainty as never before. Every generation faces impacts that shake their minds and force them to leave their comfort zone. This is an impact for a lifetime, for current and new generations. Other shocks have posed risks to fisheries before; some of them being global (climate change), regional (overfishing) or even local (illegal fishing, poverty, poor fishing management tools, lack of enforcement), to name only a few. However, the impact of the current pandemic greatly eclipses these in terms of scale and outcome.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) indicates that seafood represents 20 percent of the average animal protein intake per capita for almost half of the population worldwide; and up to 50 percent in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ghana or Sri Lanka, hence playing a paramount role in global food security. Additionally, fish production employs almost 60 million people, with 86 percent living in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As the world approaches a population of eight billion people, we face the fact that the numbers of undernourished and malnourished people have been growing. What is happening to these people in the face of COVID-19? Are they able to meet nutritional needs in a locked-down world? What role do women play in ensuring and delivering food security?

Mexico is a fishing exporting country, ranked 13th in the list of global fish producers; with approximately 170,000 fishers dedicated to coastal small-scale fisheries, according to official statistics. It is estimated that only eight percent of fishers are women, which is likely an underestimation of true numbers, as we are aware of major existing data gaps and gender bias with only people dedicated to harvesting being counted in these statistics. There are also very few studies about women in decision making. For example, in Isla Natividad (Mexican Pacific), only 9.1 per cent of high level positions in industrial fishing are represented by women. When considering an inclusive value chain-based approach in some Mexican fisheries, the number can increase to a ratio of one woman per five men or around 20 percent.

In April 2020, COBI (Comunidad y Biodiversidad AC) designed and implemented a survey to understand how COVID-19 is impacting small-scale fisheries in Mexico. Since then, interviews of 194 people on average were conducted each month (between 93 to 241 interviewees) from up to 88 fishing organizations covering 70 percent of coastal states at the national level and up to 20 fisheries. Women's participation in the interviews varied from 27 percent up to 37 percent. Early socio-economic impacts were reported, with 89 per cent of the interviewees declaring that they were affected by market lockdown and reporting price reductions from 30 per cent to 60 per cent, depending on the fishery. Those who continued fishing reported decrease in capture from 30 per cent to 80 per cent. Markets showed a preference for canned or processed food during this period, which went hand in hand with confinement measures such as panic storage of food. Twenty-nine percent of the interviewees attributed these changes to the pandemic. Also, processed seafood increases the consumer's confidence on the product. Women's role in post-production has been a key factor towards maintaining the household income. But with children not attending schools, and even more household responsibilities being sustained by women alone, continued involvement in post production activities has stretched the working day for already overworked women even further. The same situation is observed when a family member gets sick; it is generally the women (daughters, mothers, sisters) who take responsibility, and care for these people. Women in the fishing sector are most likely facing a triple burden in the gender division of labour; as well as disproportionate COVID-19 effects.

In the face of the pandemic, FAO also echoed fears about the impact of COVID-19 being particularly negative for women across economic sectors including fishing, due to the significant reduction in work and income. Those in seafood trade are vulnerable to exposure to viral load since markets are aggregation hubs with limited sanitisation and protective equipment, and since these workers lack direct access to medical care. From among the 56 women interviewed by COBI in June 2020, approximately one-third (31 per cent)



Fisherwomen harvesting clams, Gulf of California, Mexico. Except for those with fishing permits, the majority of women are not recognized as fishers in national statistics. Thus, they do not have the same access to social protection benefits offered by some governments to manage the COVID-19 outbreak

stated that they were not affiliated to any health system. Another third - 31 per cent - of the women who reportedly did have access to social security services, indicated that they were not the card holders, but appeared as beneficiaries of their husband's cards.

Additionally, except for those with fishing permits, the majority of women are not recognised as fishers in national statistics. Thus, they do not have the same access to social protection benefits offered by some governments to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. This is especially true of those who do not have the support of a fishing organization. For example, in Mexico, the government extended the BIENPESCA subsidy to the sector – the sole support provided to fishers during this period in the form of a one-time payment in May-June of approximately 325 USD. It declared that 21 percent of the subsidy amount would be for women out of a list of 193,200 beneficiaries. This would have been the first time that the subsidy was delivered to women participating in different activities in the fishing value chain. However, our interviews in May did not reflect the payment of this amount. With a sample size of 241 people from 64 fishing communities, we found not a single woman who was a beneficiary of the subsidy amount though at that time, the subsidy had not been delivered to all the beneficiaries and this result may since have

change. In the interviews, the fishers reported an unequal delivery of the economic stimulus related to fisheries between women and men as a result of the low numbers of women officially registered in the census. A fisherman stated: “The government is helping with food supplies during the pandemic. However, my wife has tried to access the stimulus package meant for the fisheries sector through her cooperative but is always left out”. Another fisherwoman added: “The stimulus is for our husbands”.

The change in family dynamics due to lockdown has also affected women's health and overall community wellbeing. Increases in violence against women within families have been reported, forcing the government to address such violence. There are national radio announcements advising women to have an emergency bag packed ready as well as access to a supportive network, (commonly, a woman friend or family member) in case of an emergency. Also, alcohol sales have been restricted or forbidden in many states, as a ‘dry law’ initiative to prevent domestic violence triggered by alcohol consumption. Despite this, during the ongoing lockdown, there has been an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages. But the rising prices of alcohol, shortages and bans, coupled with anxiety, low frustration tolerance, unemployment, and confinement have all fueled violence against

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women. This combination has led to an increase in domestic violence-related distress calls reported by the National Women's Institute in Mexico (INMujeres), whose response capacities have been overstretched by the pandemic, and which faces severe budget constraints to implement projects.

Interestingly, some women are displaying great levels of adaptive capacity and entrepreneurship in Mexican fishing communities together with collective action. For instance, a fishing cooperative in the Mexican Caribbean began door-to-door sales of seafood products to enable their cooperative to maintain at least a minimum income during the pandemic. A member of the cooperative who worked as a technician with the cooperative took the lead in organizing the logistics, using existing platforms, such as their Facebook page, in an innovative way to boost sales. This also boosted food security by ensuring that high quality animal protein reached families in need. Additionally, the price for fin fish fillet was lowered since it became clear that local families could not afford to pay the usual prices, given the high degree of job loss with tourism, hotels and restaurants all shutting down.

Through our interviews, we have observed equal contributions from men and women to

innovative adaptation strategies and solutions. Women from fishing communities are developing alternative activities to stabilise their incomes. These activities include preparation and trading of food (46 percent), cleaning and sanitisation of spaces and clothing (14 percent), selling general products such as makeup, jewellery and clothing (12 percent), as well as preparation of personal protection equipment (PPE) against COVID-19, handcrafts and conservation activities.

Women are traditionally invisible, ignored and underrepresented in fisheries worldwide, though they play a key role in providing food security. Sadly, the pandemic has done nothing but exacerbated those effects, deepening the gender gap in fisheries. An interviewee remarked that more gender-inclusive leadership could be the way forward since "we have read that countries led by women are getting out of the crisis more quickly". Women display great adaptive capacities and will probably play a key role in the path to the new normality. Therefore, greater opportunities must be generated for them to participate in decision-making arenas, so that their ideas are heard and considered when building resilience of fishing communities in the face of the current crisis. ❏