

Small-scale fisheries and food security

A brief overview of relevant global findings and processes on the contributions of small-scale fisheries and rights to food and nutrition security, with a focus on the FAO

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The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the UN General Assembly in 1979 can be seen as the formalisation of the recognition of the rights and roles of women, and a commitment of the global community to respect and support these. It also charted the way for the next historical milestone in realising women's rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995 which charted the pathways for women's empowerment. The importance of gender equality is also reflected in the outcome document of the Rio+20 conference 'The future we want', which has a section on gender equality and women's empowerment, culminating in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 dedicated to gender equality. All these processes show that the concept of gender is historical, and at the same time developing as global understanding of related issues is growing and evolving. It is diffused, challenged and reaffirmed according to each historical period and context in which women and men live and interpret their lives. Within fisheries, the global normative framework, first and foremost the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries adopted by the FAO Committee on Fisheries in 1995, lagged behind in specifically addressing gender and women, and both issues are notably absent from the Code. Since then, considerable progress has been made in recognising and valuing the role of women in fisheries. In fact, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) endorsed by that same committee in 2014 include gender equity and equality among the guiding principles and have a dedicated chapter on gender. While the final version of this chapter has been

considerably reduced and softened compared to the initial drafts, it can still be considered an important achievement to have such a chapter in a document that was endorsed by a body composed primarily of representatives of national fisheries administrations who often remain grounded in the traditional fisheries management paradigm with an environmental focus.

According to 'The Status of Food Security and Nutrition in the World', a flagship report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), that was just released, the number of people affected by hunger in the world continues an increasing trend that started in 2014. This means that an estimated two billion people in the world were subject to moderate or severe food insecurity and did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food in 2019. The report notes that the gender gap in accessing food increased from 2018 to 2019 and that the prevalence of child stunting in 2019 was 21.3 percent, or 144 million children.

Reading these figures against the backdrop of the unprecedented situation of COVID-19 that the world is currently facing makes them



Gender-neutral visual identity of International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA)



Woman at fish market in Suva, Fiji. Small-scale fisheries provide nutritious food, either directly for consumption within the household, or by supplying markets, from informal markets on the shores of a lake all the way to highly sophisticated global markets

even more unacceptable. COVID-19 has hit all and everything, and it brings to light important inequalities that persist – and in many cases are deepening, including in relation to our food systems. The above mentioned report points out that “while most of the poor around the world can afford an energy sufficient diet...they cannot afford either a nutrient adequate or a healthy diet.”

The report offers a powerful lens to address this dilemma: “Valuing the hidden costs (or negative externalities) associated with different diets could modify significantly our assessment of what is ‘affordable’ from a broader societal perspective and reveal how dietary choices affect other SDGs.”

This lens can be applied when thinking about the contributions of small-scale fisheries and rights to food and nutrition security. Valuing a food production system requires that there is sufficient understanding of its characteristics, functioning and contributions. Understanding of small-scale fisheries is often notably missing, in particular in relation to broader societal contributions that translate to improvements in health, social stability, cultural identity – or gender equity.

Small-scale fisheries provide nutritious food, either directly for consumption within the household, or by supplying markets, from informal markets on the shores of a lake all the way to highly sophisticated global markets. And in fact, there appears to be a slow shift towards better integrating fisheries and food security and nutrition. In November 2019, FAO organized an International Symposium on Fisheries Sustainability: Strengthening the Science-Policy Nexus, that took place in Rome and was

attended by around 1000 participants, including from governments, research, and civil society organizations. Importantly, the symposium did include a dedicated session on ‘Fish in food security and nutrition’ which highlighted the need to ensure that aquatic foods are reaching those that need it most, including within households. While the Symposium did not have a dedicated session on gender, it was embedded in the session on ‘Securing sustainable fisheries livelihoods’ and a cross-cutting key message emerged from all sessions that “Gender equality and equity with support to the younger generations must be improved. Proactive mechanisms for this include elevating the role of women in decision making; engagement of youth; focused capacity building actions; gender statistics; sex- and age- disaggregated data.” This symposium is expected to inform the work of FAO, and we can already see this reflected in key messages from the 2020 edition of FAO’s State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture Report, which confirm the growing recognition of the great potential of the oceans and inland waters to contribute significantly to food security and adequate nutrition for a global population expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050.

This recognition of the role of fisheries for food security and nutrition needs to go hand in hand with the recognition of the role of women in the sector. Currently the only global estimate available remains the one in the Hidden Harvest study published in 2012 by World Bank, FAO and World Fish, according to which 47 per cent of the total workforce in the sector are women.

More recent estimates for women’s engagement in marine fisheries have been published, for example, a study by Sarah Harper

and colleagues published in March 2020, which estimates the global contribution by women to small-scale marine capture fisheries production. Currently, FAO, WorldFish and Duke University are in the process of conducting a global study with the title 'Illuminating Hidden Harvests: the contribution of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development' (IHH) that aims to provide global estimates of some of those key contributions and to contribute to better document the role of women in relation to fish production, processing, marketing and consumption. A team of 25 gender advisors representing 23 countries is supporting the preparation of the study. Importantly, this IHH study will include a section on food security and nutrition, with global estimates as well as with thematic studies, for example on the importance of small-scale fisheries in first 1,000 days of life. It will also look into sub-national analyses to better understand the linkages among small-scale fisheries, fish consumption, diet diversity, nutrition and the health status of children. Preliminary findings point to evidence that in some sub-national regions, pregnant and lactating women can consume one and a half times more fish than what is reported for all women at a national level.

The 'Blue Paper: Towards Ocean Equity' released earlier in 2020 has a section that examines the scientific documentation of inequities in small-scale fisheries which are undermining sustainable livelihoods and contribute to the loss of well-being. Among these, invisible gendered inequities are documented from multiple locations around that world, that illustrate how "women are often invisible, and hence marginalised in the management of marine resources (e.g. due to gender-blind policies, focus on formal and paid fishing activities, or the production segment of fisheries value chains)." Similar gendered inequity in access is documented in the form of "barriers to profitable segments of supply chains, and/or access to fishing grounds, boats, fishing, gear, financial capital, credit, education and alternative livelihoods." The key messages of the paper include that "a sustainable ocean economy should protect human rights, improve human well-being, stimulate inclusion and gender equity, and prioritise recognition, diversity and equal access to resources to provide fair opportunities consistent with sustainable development."

The previous sections illustrate the key imperative to ensure gender equity in small-scale fisheries as an enabling factor to fully support the supply of fish as food and as source of income, in line with SDG target 14.b – *Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets*. The realisation of this SDG target should be inclusive of men and women, and it should also be applied to inland fisheries.

A recent human rights instrument that amplifies the underlying SDG principle to leave

no one behind and that supports small-scale food producers, including fisherfolk, is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas¹ which was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2018. This Declaration recalls fundamental instruments, such as CEDAW, and even refers to the SSF Guidelines. The Declaration pays specific attention to women, and countries should be held accountable to implement it.

The human rights based approach is also the underlying principle of a number of instruments developed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Some of these CFS instruments have direct links to the SSF Guidelines. The CFS is currently shepherding the international negotiations of Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems for Nutrition (VGFSyN) and the draft of these guidelines defines that "Food systems are complex webs of activities and actors involving the production, processing, handling, preparation, storage, distribution, consumption and ultimately waste of food. They are constantly being shaped by different forces, drivers and decisions by many different individuals. Every food system has the capacity to be equitable and to produce healthy diets needed for optimal nutrition. But, they can also be shaped by power concentration and imbalances, which may not be inclusive and equitable. Some food systems are sustainable while others show their limits in terms of sustainability and inefficiency in natural resource utilization, and in the use of labour and energy, leading to environmental degradation, water pollution, and loss of biodiversity as well as to excessive food consumption and food waste patterns"

The objective of these new guidelines are in line with the traditional four dimensions of food security as they aim "to contribute to transforming food systems and promoting sustainable food systems to ensure that the food that contributes to sustainable healthy diets is available, affordable, accessible, safe, and of adequate quantity and quality while conforming with beliefs, culture and traditions, dietary habits, and preferences of individuals, in accordance with national and international laws and obligations." If agreed and applied properly, this last addition to the traditional definition of food security can make an important difference in relation to gender equity, and it will therefore be important for small-scale fisheries actors to engage in the finalization of these new guidelines.

To conclude, it is important to start preparing for the celebration of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) that will be celebrated in 2022 and which will provide an opportunity to further analyse and showcase small-scale fisheries contributions and rights to food and nutrition security. ❏

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