

# Critical interventions

## Protecting the wellbeing of small-scale fishing communities and their human rights crucially involves protecting the rights of women in fisheries

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After decades of concern with addressing environmental sustainability issues in global fisheries, recent investigative journalism has brought increased attention to human rights violations in seafood supply chains, including human trafficking, forced labour, and horrific working and living conditions on fishing vessels.

The collective response of the seafood sustainability movement has been encouraging. Governments, non-profits, civil society organizations and worker-led movements have rallied together to afford greater protection to fishers and workers at sea.

In addition, industry- and nonprofit-led certifications, standards, and Codes of Conduct are rapidly proliferating. These efforts mark a step forward for social responsibility and the protection of human rights by the public and private sectors. However, these efforts are largely focused on addressing labour rights violations offshore and in the industrial sector.

Gender-blind interventions that focus on social protections at the vessel level do not afford protections to most women working in the fishing sector. The vast majority of women fishers are engaged in onshore fishing and gleaning, small-scale aquaculture, and seafood processing.

In coastal fisheries across many societies, women contribute significantly to providing protein for their households, thus contributing to food and nutritional security, and play a critical role in adding economic value to fish catches through their engagement in processing and marketing activities.

Women's rights in fisheries are critical to recognize and uphold. Gender roles, social relations, and systemic discrimination in all societies across the globe lead to increased vulnerabilities for women in fisheries. They also face the egregious issue of gender based violence. Furthermore, women have less access to social protections due to their status as unregistered workers, the temporary nature of their contracts, and their participation in the informal workforce. These systemic inequalities

have combined with the effects of COVID-19 during 2020–2021 to exacerbate vulnerabilities of women to health risks, and food and livelihood insecurity.

The characterization of human rights abuses in fisheries primarily as labour abuses at sea perpetuates a prioritization of civil and political rights over economic, social, and cultural rights. Examples of violations of civil and political rights are when workers aboard a fishing vessel are discriminated against, treated inhumanely, held against their will, and do not have formal rights to organize. There are commendable efforts to address such violations by labour organizations and grassroots, worker-led movements. However, human trafficking and deplorable labour conditions are also accompanied by other serious, but less well-recognized social issues such as chronic and institutionalized inequality and insecurity. For example, when foreign fleets overfish in the Exclusive Economic Zone of food insecure countries, fishing as a livelihood for local fisherfolk is no longer economically viable; communities' rights to food security are undermined. This is a violation of their economic, social, and cultural rights. Such rights are of particular relevance for small-scale fisheries and fishing communities. These include rights to food, water, decent work and standard of living, for women, children and migrants.

Importantly, women's rights, the well-being of small-scale fishing communities', and economic, social, and cultural rights are all inextricably linked. Through their roles as fishers, processors, and household food providers, women contribute the most consistent source of protein to their families in small-scale fishing communities. Thus, if women's rights to food, decent work, education, and healthcare, and freedom from discrimination and gender-based violence are undermined, the effects are felt at the household- and community-levels.

Thus, while recognizing the critical interventions that help to protect fishers' and workers' rights and lives at sea, it is equally important for the collective seafood



Sophy, a resident of a floating village on Tonle Sap Lake, cleans fish in preparation for making fish paste as her daughter looks on. In coastal fisheries across many societies, women contribute significantly to providing protein for their households

sustainability movements to invest more resources in developing social safeguards that reach women and small-scale fishing communities onshore; to foster collaboration with researchers, advocates, unions and civil society organizations who have also been working on these issues.

Governments play an important role in advancing women's and economic, social, and cultural rights in fisheries. Embedding the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) in national legislation represents a concrete and tangible way forward in this respect.

Seafood businesses have a responsibility to ensure their policies have explicit gender equity

considerations, and also consider impacts of their operations on small-scale fisheries and their communities, while respecting customary rights including tenure rights, and rights to nutritious food and decent work. Greater government accountability and business responsibility must also be met by bottom-up and grassroots efforts. It is important to reiterate the critical role of civil society organizations who were deeply involved in the co-creation of the SSF Guidelines, in the implementation of these guidelines and in upholding women's and human rights in fisheries.

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