

# Gender in voluntary standards for the seafood industry

**The Asian Seafood Improvement Collaborative (ASIC) and its partners have developed a voluntary social and gender standard for the small-scale fisheries and aquaculture sector**

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Between 10 and 12 per cent of the world's population depends on fisheries and aquaculture for their livelihoods and nutrition. In the past decade, investigative reports have exposed the human rights violations pervasive throughout seafood supply chains, ranging from wage theft and illegal recruitment fees, inadequate health and safety protections, to violence, abuse and even murder. These issues undermine the resilience of seafood supply chains, but more importantly, they threaten the lives and well-being of families and communities working in the sector. Without adequate protection and enforcement measures, workers throughout supply chains are vulnerable to exploitation and human rights abuses. It has become increasingly important to develop innovative tools and approaches that protect the rights of workers and producers, and that amplify their voices.

The risks of exploitation and opportunities for success in the seafood industry are also gendered as men and women occupy different spaces in the supply chain. Estimates suggest that women represent nearly half of all workers in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, with 85 per cent of those workers being located in Asia. Yet to this day, most industry and government initiatives are gender-blind, meaning that they do not consider the social, political, cultural and economic differences between men and women that impact their outcomes and opportunities. This is particularly dangerous since many women working in the seafood sector occupy unpaid, underpaid and/or unrecognised roles with little visibility and decision making power.

Data tells us that while men perform most of the primary fishing and aquaculture production, women contribute vital time and labour across all nodes of the value chain and contribute most of the labour in pre- and post-harvest activities. Women represent the majority of workers in processing plants and face various risks, including exorbitantly low wages, unsuitable health and safety measures, as well as sexual and gender based violence and harassment.

Similarly, despite common perceptions of a male-dominated industry, women often contribute to primary production, completing tasks including pond stocking and feeding,

operating ventilators, and increasingly through fishing activities both on and off vessels. However, since most of this work is done in small, family-run farms and/or fishing operations, women's contributions are largely ignored and undervalued. This contributes to the unequal division of labour, as women often work more hours (particularly unpaid hours) per day than men and have less leisure time. At a broader scale, ignoring women's contributions to primary production can also result in the marginalisation of women from natural resource management and decision making forums, from training and extension services, and from access to credit and income generating opportunities, which further exacerbates inequalities.

While the sustainable seafood movement has rallied against egregious human and labour rights abuses through the development of certifications, codes of conduct, and non-profit partnerships, there remains a glaring omission in the majority of these tools. Despite the vital presence of women in seafood production, most existing standards and improvement tools do not account for the gender-specific risks and barriers facing women in the sector. While some standards include non-discrimination criteria, these indicators often minimise gender equality as a goal and do not address the obstacles that women face in global supply chains. These inequalities include the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, unequal access to resources, gender based violence and harassment, and the lack of representation in leadership positions. As a result, gender-blind interventions at best perpetuate existing gender inequities, and at worst actively contribute to keeping women invisible and devaluing their work. This situation puts women at risk of further marginalisation and exploitation, and excludes them from equally benefitting from fishery and aquaculture resources.

In recognition of the need to include and account for women in social sustainability initiatives, the Asian Seafood Improvement Collaborative (ASIC) partnered with Oxfam under the Gender-Transformative and Responsible Agribusiness Investments in Southeast Asia (GRAISEA) project to develop a voluntary social and gender standard for



Hasmia, a shrimp farmer in Pinrang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia is checking the salinity in her pond to ensure optimal growing conditions

**The standard includes eight fundamental principles which seek to address pressing human and labour rights challenges in the industry**

the small-scale fisheries and aquaculture sector. Primarily designed as an improvement programme, ASIC’s standards aim to support small-scale farmers, fisheries, and processing facilities to improve working conditions in their operations.

The standard includes eight fundamental principles which seek to address pressing human and labour rights challenges in the industry. Gender equality, women’s empowerment, and social inclusion were mainstreamed throughout the standard. Gender Equality and Women’s Economic Empowerment was named as the fifth principle in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and to foreground it as a goal worthy of attention in and of itself.

When mainstreaming gender throughout the standard, consideration was given to the particular needs and barriers facing women and girls at all stages of seafood supply chains. This means that all goals and criteria were evaluated through a gender lens in order to ensure that the content and intentions promote equality, inclusion, and empowerment. For example, the standard requires that operations and producer groups provide child-care services during all training, workshops, meetings, and other group activities. This is to facilitate women’s participation by recognising the restrictions on their time imposed through unpaid care

work. Similarly, it is required that all worker committees, unions, or other elected groups in the workplace be representative of the workforce, including women, migrant workers, and other marginalised populations. There are additional criteria that are further designed to promote a gender-responsive work environment. These include minimum requirements for paid maternity leave, the provision of nursing rooms and nursing breaks, the prohibition of inquiries into marital status or family planning, as well as a ban on all forms of sexual violence and a responsive, equitable, and accessible grievance and remediation procedure.

In addition to addressing risks to women and girls during paid and unpaid work, this standard also focuses on improvement to encourage participants to go above and beyond by integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment into their core business practices. As an improvement oriented standard, participants are supported to pursue a second tier of recognition called ASIC Leader. To achieve this recognition, participants must implement activities that earnestly support empowerment, opportunity, and well-being in their communities. This includes executing gender-transformative projects, such as by providing and encouraging the use of paid paternity leave, providing paid leave as well as legal and medical support to workers experiencing domestic violence, paying all workers a living wage, and supporting educational opportunities for girls in their communities.

ASIC’s standards are currently being piloted with multiple processors and small-scale shrimp farming cooperatives in Indonesia. Already, there has been significant market interest from buyers in North America and Europe to support seafood products that promote social responsibility, community resilience, and women’s empowerment. Consumers are increasingly concerned with equity and sustainability, and their purchasing habits are reflecting this trend. To meet consumer demand and support the livelihoods of seafood producing communities, the sustainable seafood movement must adopt a holistic approach that prioritises equity and inclusion. This means embracing collaboration and championing worker and producer driven initiatives. It requires that all members of this movement go beyond corporate policies and codes of conduct to form effective partnerships across supply chains that meaningfully engage all participants in processes to uphold the rights of women and girls, promote gender equality, and foster long-term prosperity. ❖