

# What women want

## Learnings from regional workshops held across the world to mark the 2022 International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture

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The invisibility of women in fisheries has been discussed for some time now, but was brought into sharp focus in a series of regional workshops that took place from 2022 to 2023 in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia to mark the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) 2022. In these workshops, women fishers spoke out, shared their experiences, pointed out the issues they face and developed recommendations for gender equality.

More and more studies and reports are highlighting women's role in, and contributions to, the fisheries. The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) have strong gender components. Many fisheries conferences, workshops, and meetings now include gender

sessions and discussions. There is greater official recognition of women in fisheries in some countries. For example, in Indonesia, women fishers used to be categorized as housewives in terms of their occupation and were therefore excluded from holding fisher identity cards; but now, they are officially registered as fishers, enabling them to access subsidies and other support targeted at fishers by the government.

The IYAFA workshops highlighted the various roles that women play in the fisheries. Women work as fishers on boats and as producers of post-harvest products, as porters and transporters, as large and small traders, and also in ancillary services such as selling food to fishers to take on boats. In both Africa and Asia, women fish traders export fish through border trade.

Women have always engaged in fishing. Across regions, women have songs for the ocean

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Group photo from Asia Workshop: IYAFA 2022-Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, 5 to 8 May 2022, Bangkok, Thailand

During the *IYafa Asia Workshop: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-Scale Fisheries*, which took place in Bangkok, Thailand from 5-8 May 2022, one day was dedicated to a participatory exchange on women and gender in small-scale fisheries. The aims of the exchange were to reflect on the challenges women face in both harvest and post-harvest work; share inspiring examples of women's organizations and mobilization; amplify women's voices; and develop an Action Plan for the Asian region.

Participants in the workshop included representatives of small-scale fisher and fishworker associations, cooperatives, trade unions, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations from eleven South and Southeast Asian countries – namely Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. Half of the workshop's 60 participants were women, with a wealth of experience in organizing and mobilizing other women in their communities to raise their voices and tackle the challenges they are facing in fisheries.

Women experience a range of diverse challenges across the Asian region. Despite different local and national contexts, they face many similar obstacles, including lack of access to fisheries resources, spaces to sell fish, participation in decision-making processes, opportunities to organize, education, training and technology. Women often experience a triple burden – trying to balance household responsibilities; harvest and pre- and post-harvest activities; and participating in community activities and organizations.

The women participating in the Asia workshop highlighted the importance of uniting their struggles and working together to find creative solutions to tackle the challenges they are facing. They collectively pinpointed several actions, listed below, that need to be taken in the Asian region:

- 1) **Women's labour must be more widely recognized** for its crucial contributions to the fisheries sector, including household responsibilities (caring for families and children); harvesting (fishing and mollusk gathering); and pre- and post-harvest work (preparing for fishing, mending gear, processing and selling). This work is too often invisible, and seen as a familial duty without economic compensation, failing to acknowledge the fundamental role this work plays in the functioning of the sector.
- 2) **Women's organizations and networks must be established** as spaces where women can discuss common challenges, support each other, collectively develop ways to address the issues they are facing, and amplify their voices. These organizations and networks should be established by women in fishing communities themselves, with the technical and logistical support of allied groups and organizations. This also helps to foster valuable alliances with like-minded groups. Existing women's organizations need to be supported and strengthened in order to continue to grow, become more visible, and provide spaces for the next generations of leaders.
- 3) **Family support must be encouraged** to facilitate women's participation in organizations, networks and community work. Many family members worry that women's participation in community activities will interfere with their household responsibilities or put them in danger for engaging in public activism. Women who are dependent on their husband's income are often not able to access funds to travel to mobilizations or other events. Efforts should be made at the community and family level to discuss these issues and find appropriate context-specific ways to address them.
- 4) **Training programmes must be set up** to provide support and guidance to the next generation of women leaders, including opportunities to learn from and be inspired by others in their communities. This is particularly important for empowering and building the confidence of young women and educating them about their rights as community members. Women-led organizations can establish their own networks to mentor and train women in their communities, while allied groups and organizations can provide support and resources (technical, information, funding) for such programmes.
- 5) **Access to capacity-building opportunities** for women at the community level must be facilitated and supported by governments and local organizations, including access to education and training programmes to build knowledge, skills and technology literacy. Support – such as transportation, child care and funding – should also be provided in order to facilitate women's participation in such programmes.
- 6) **Spaces must be opened up for women to participate** in fisheries governance and co-management processes. Women have the right to a say in programmes and processes that directly affect them. Their direct participation will ensure that their voices are heard, and that they can contribute their knowledge and experience to developing programmes for addressing the obstacles they face and enhancing their opportunities. Community committees should ensure equal participation of male and female representatives, and women's representation must be real and equitable, and not just tokenism.
- 7) **Data collection on women** working in fisheries must be expanded significantly in order to develop a better picture of the contributions they make to the sector, the challenges they face, and what is needed to address these challenges. More data on women working in inland fisheries is particularly important. Women themselves should be directly involved in the collection of this data, as they are best situated to connect with other women in their communities, while governments and fisheries departments should include gender disaggregated information in fisheries databases.
- 8) **Gender-sensitivity in fisheries policies must be improved** in order to ensure that differences in roles and responsibilities in the sector are not glossed over. Women are too often excluded from social security protection and become dependent on male family members to access government support, such as loans, healthcare, unemployment and life insurance, and childcare subsidies. Women should be able to register themselves and access services directly in order to facilitate empowerment and independence. 🗑️

Artisanal fishworkers' representatives from 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries convened on Ilha do Cardoso Island in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, for a regional workshop organized by ICSF in collaboration with CONFREM, as part of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022 (IYAFA - 2022) to discuss the regional challenges and strategies for the sector.

The workshop titled "IYAFA 2022 Workshop in Latin America and the Caribbean: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-Scale Fisheries", witnessed fishers, both men and women, jointly crafting an action plan for gender equity in the region, following the provisions for the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines).

The participants acknowledged that public policies for gender equity are not at the same level of implementation across Latin America and the Caribbean. Where legal systems are lagging, efforts must be made to advance new legislation, projects, and actions to support women's rights to protect their mental, physical and occupational wellbeing. The importance of safeguarding women's traditional and customary knowledge and practices, vital to sustaining economic and social welfare as well as the way of life of traditional fishing communities, was repeatedly highlighted. The workshop emphasized the need for the full recognition of women's contribution to fisheries management and environmental governance as well as their role in safeguarding food security.

The participants highlighted the following strategies, to be further developed by fishermen and fisherwomen's organizations, supporters, and policymakers:

- Create and/or implement public policies for women, with efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of these policies.
- Ensure that fisherwomen are aware of their legal rights; promote training on women's rights; ensure that these rights are well reflected in public policies in all spheres as well as in the functioning of artisanal fishing organizations;
- Ensure that governmental and non-governmental organizations gain capacity and are aware of the legal rights and protections due to fisherwomen; that these rights are fully implemented and that new regulation is enacted, as needed, to enable their full implementation;
- Promote and strengthen debates on the violations of women's rights in the region in order to foster pathways towards a new culture of respect and appreciation of women;
- Recognize as traditional rights the customary practices and rules established of communities and guarantee that customary and traditional tenure systems accommodate constitutional or legal reforms that strengthen the rights of women;
- Enhance projects and norms that promote women's participation and leadership in decision-making roles in fishers' organizations and other decision-making arenas;
- Make women's work in artisanal fisheries' value-chains more visible and valued, compensate their domestic services, and support their economic diversification if needed. All stages of the fisheries value chain should guarantee equal payment for women and men for the same work;
- Promote peer-to-peer learning among women with regard to their equitable integration in fisheries-related work and to support their economic activities.
- Develop strategies for valuing and developing the knowledge and skills of fisherwomen, who demonstrate competence both at the level of domestic finance management as well as the management of work in the fisheries value chain;
- Create and implement strategic plans for gender equality at all levels (community, organizations, and public authorities)
- Plan and implement community work routines and tasks in ways that do not burden fisherwomen with work overload;
- Provide economic instruments (programmes and projects) exclusively for women, to suit their interests and capabilities;
- Negotiate pro-women banking schemes with differentiated financing options that prioritize women and support women-led initiatives.
- Ensure gender equity as a fundamental criterion and priority in the design and support of all initiatives to be implemented in artisanal fishing territories across Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Promote education on gender equity across generations through family education programmes and school curricula.
- Build capacity and develop educational strategies directed towards men on sexual violence, drug abuse, alcoholism and conflict resolution, highlighting the impact of alcoholism on violence against women;
- Promote access to and adoption of new technologies, such as fishing craft and gear, personal safety equipment, and infrastructure, by women;
- Mobilize media to spread public awareness on women's participation in artisanal fisheries, and to end taboos and barriers with regard to women's participation in harvesting and other roles along fish value chains;
- Use communication tools to dispel myths, such as, for example, the myth that menstruating women cannot go fishing, and other stigmas that discriminate against women;
- Promote the sharing of information and learning in schools about the role of women in artisanal fisheries.

- Ensure the availability of specialized and humane services that recognize and address the occupational health hazards of women fishers;
- Combat water and air pollution to protect fisherwomen's health;
- Protect social security rights of all women fishers and fishworkers, whether documented or not;
- Denounce all forms of violence, and the culture of violence, against fisherwomen. Femicide must be firmly dealt with at all levels of society;
- Disseminate information about laws, psychological services, self-defence skills, and specialized legal protections to fisherwomen and their families, as well as to victims of violence, and put in place support networks for fisherwomen, with shelter, financial support, and protection for their children;
- Highlight the institutional violence that affects women fishers as well as the need to ensure the protection of children and the provisioning of maintenance to affected families of fishers;
- Ensure conflict resolution training for fisherwomen and create programmes for young women in conflict situations;
- Guarantee access to counselling services for fisherwomen, with the assurance of home- or community-based care;
- Ensure psychological care for women suffering all types of violence, as well as access to domestic services, labour participation and child care;
- Promote legal services in cases of violence against women;
- Facilitate access to organizations that provide preventive health and legal services to women;
- Promote gender training to governmental or civil society agencies that serve women;
- Promote educational programmes to advance sexual self-care and support in all artisanal fishing territories;
- Deepen discussions about women's bodies, violence, health, and reproductive rights;
- Preserve and value women's traditional knowledge on medicinal plants in public health policies;
- Create new laws and policies on gender equity in collaboration with fisherwomen;
- Establish the regular exchange of information and impart specific training to empower fisherwomen to exercise their rights, including through the sharing of lessons learned on the implementation of different national strategies in relation to gender equity for empowerment and capacity building. **■**

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Group photo from Latin America and the Caribbean Workshop: IYAFA 2022-Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, Brazil, 2-5 November 2022

During the *IYAFA Africa Workshop: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-Scale Fisheries*, which took place in Accra, Ghana from 15-18 February 2023, one full day was devoted to participatory exchanges on women and gender in small-scale fisheries. The aims of the exchange were to reflect on the challenges women face in both harvest and post-harvest work; share inspiring examples of women's organizations and mobilization; amplify women's voices; and develop an Action Plan for the African region.

Participants in the workshop included representatives of small-scale fisher and fishworker associations, cooperatives, trade unions, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations from 16 African countries – namely Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, and Uganda. Half of the workshop's 51 participants were women, with a wealth of experience in organizing and mobilizing other women in their communities to raise their voices and collectively tackle the challenges they are facing in fisheries.

Despite different local and national contexts, women across the African region face similar challenges and obstacles, including lack of access to fisheries resources; safe and clean spaces to process and sell fish; participation in decision-making processes; support for organizing and setting up cooperatives and associations; finance; education and training opportunities. However, the women participating in the Africa workshop also shared their experiences of agency and innovativeness, illustrating their capacities for resilience which can be emulated and shared. They highlighted the importance of uniting their struggles and working together to find creative solutions to tackle the challenges they are facing. Through collective discussions, they pinpointed several concrete actions, listed below, that need to be taken in the African region:

- 1) **Capacity-development, education and training opportunities** for women must be established, with facilitation and support from governments and local organizations. These opportunities should be centred upon strengthening women's voices and knowledge of their rights; educational support enabling girls to stay in school longer; capacity-development for women leaders (particularly youth) in small-scale fishing communities; and fish processing techniques that allow women to work more safely and hygienically. Financial, logistical and institutional support is crucial during such trainings and to follow-up on training outcomes.
- 2) **Women's participation in fisheries decision-making spaces** must be strengthened in order for women to be able to actively contribute to processes that directly affect them. Structures in fisheries must begin at the grassroots level to ensure decision-making is actually taking concrete community issues into account. There must be more deliberate action taken to achieve gender transformation, including creating spaces and platforms for women to voice the issues they are facing.
- 3) **Preferential access must be provided for women to access financial support**, such as grants, credit and loans, that support their activities in fisheries. This includes support for setting up their own harvesting, processing or selling businesses; investing in new harvesting gear or processing tools (including new technologies); paying membership fees to cooperatives or associations; or for enrolling in skills training programmes.
- 4) **The establishment of cooperatives, associations and other organizations** should be prioritized by women working in fisheries, with technical and financial support from governments and allied organizations. These organizations should remain independent from external influences and be properly registered according to national regulations. Existing organizations must also be supported in order to strengthen and expand capacities. Women's organizations should focus on providing spaces to discuss and develop strategies for addressing common challenges, while opportunities are created for organizations to network, share experiences and collaborate in order to facilitate unity and collective action.
- 5) **Mechanisms must be put in place to support grassroots women's organizations directly**, allowing them to access financial and other support independently, and to determine programmes and activities based on their community needs. External organizations should not determine what interventions and outcomes are needed without first taking community voices into account. Women's organizations should also receive leadership and skills training in order to strengthen their capacities in resource mobilization; democratic governance; conflict management; and advocacy.
- 6) **Awareness must be raised about the challenges women in fisheries are facing and their innovativeness**, highlighting the importance of their roles in addressing issues like climate change, pollution and declining resources in their communities. Women are often the first to take responsibility for working toward sustainable fisheries and resource use, and yet their crucial contributions are too often unrecognized. Scaling up advocacy work and information sharing on women's roles and emulating innovative and collaborative efforts being made that support women-led fish processing and trading activities should be prioritized.
- 7) **Action must be taken all along the fisheries value chain to prevent waste and food loss**, which have direct impacts on women's livelihoods. This includes investment in landing sites and infrastructure, smoking and processing facilities, storage and refrigeration, adequate packaging, hygiene and food safety training. Women's organizations should also be provided with financial support or insurance policies for their members to recoup losses when they lose a significant amount of their fisheries products due to adverse weather or breakdown of storage facilities.
- 8) **Governments should scale-up their support for women in fisheries**, including through the development of gender-sensitive policies and the establishment of gender departments or committees which are directly responsible for addressing gender-based challenges and obstacles in fishing communities. Such departments or committees should also be carefully trained on the crosscutting gender dimension of the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries* (the SSF Guidelines) and contribute to the development of national plan of action for implementing the SSF Guidelines. **✎**



Group photo from Africa Workshop: IYAFSA 2022-Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, 15-18 February 2023

During the IYAFA Regional Workshop: *Getting the story straight and envisioning a fair future for small-scale fisheries in Europe* that was organized in Galicia, Spain from 13-16 November 2023, a session was conducted to discuss the concerns raised by female fishers and fishworkers. Half of the workshop's 50 participants were women and included representatives of small-scale fisher and fishworker associations, cooperatives, community-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations and academia.

The women highlighted the need for visibility of their labour and meaningful participation in decision making spaces. They collectively pinpointed several actions that need to be taken in the Europe region which are listed as the Women in Fisheries Action Plan for the Europe Region in the following section.

### Women in Fisheries Action Plan for the Europe Region

1. Women are constrained by traditional and cultural roles rooted in patriarchal norms, and their labour is invisible and undervalued. Women's labour, (including their informal labour) must be recognized for its crucial contributions to the economy, food security of the communities and sustainable fisheries.
2. Effective measures supported by all necessary legislative and social changes must be undertaken to enable women's equitable participation in fisheries governance, so that they can contribute their knowledge and experience to the processes and policies affecting their lives.
3. Women must have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in co-management processes for sustainable fisheries.
4. Women's voices must be heard. Existing and new women's organizations need to be supported and strengthened in order to continue to grow, become more visible, and provide spaces for the next generations of leaders and promote collective action.
5. Women's livelihoods must be protected by promoting the principles of decent work, including social security, health protection (including the recognition of occupational illnesses) and social benefit schemes such as maternity and paternity benefits.
6. Extensive research is necessary on women in fisheries to gather evidence on the invisible roles of women in fisheries in Europe. Better gender disaggregated data is needed for targeted policies in support of female fishers and fishworkers.
7. Capacity building programmes catering to the needs of women need to be designed to promote their participation in leadership roles and vocational skill development.
8. Gender-sensitive technologies must be developed and appropriate working conditions ensured to cater to the needs of women in fisheries. 🗣️

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Group photo from IYAFA Regional workshop: *Getting the story straight and envisioning a fair future for small-scale fisheries in Europe*, 13-16 November 2023, Galicia, Spain

and pray for safety at sea. In some regions, it was a practice for both women and men to go out to fish. In the Gaelic language, which is spoken in Ireland, there was no term as fisherman; fishers were called “iascaire” – a person who fishes. Women fishers express their sense of freedom and joy, as well as pride in being able to raise and educate children through their fishing activities.

With women’s growing visibility and their efforts at organizing themselves, now there are a number of women fishers’ organizations, for example, USCOFEP-CI (Union des sociétés cooperatives des Femmes de la pêche et assimilées de Côte d’Ivoire) in Côte d’Ivoire, Kiyindi Women Fish Processors Association in Uganda, and CONFREM, the women’s secretariat for Bahia Network in Brazil. In Thailand, women fishers’ networks hold meetings once every three months. Despite persisting gender discrimination in fishers’ organizations, women are gaining voice. In Cambodia, a country where many women occupy government positions, women fishers report that they are able to discuss their issues with the government more easily. In Tanzania, the strength of the Tanzania Women Fishworkers Association is demonstrated by the fact that the Principal Secretary of Fisheries came forward to meet with them and discuss their problems. At the same time, while the need for women leaders was strongly advocated, whether all women leaders, merely on account of their being women, did actually represent women artisanal fishers was a point of debate. Caution was raised that establishing women’s groups or wings within larger fishers’ organizations could marginalize women leaders from the mainstream of women fishers.

In the workshops, it was repeatedly stressed that women are more organized, and women are the ones who are pushing the fisheries organizations forward. Women pool resources together for trade. They participate strongly to protect fishing resources and have proven themselves to be the stewards of the environment. The strong leadership and active engagement of women in fisheries shows that women are calling for support not because they are weak, but because they are entitled to it. As a participant from Sweden said, “Women knew what they wanted, they had a narrative and a vision for the future, and they wanted gender equality”.

Technology development is another unique area where women’s involvement is making a difference. Women are developing and using clean technologies for fish processing. For example, in Uganda, women use clean technology for smoking fish, free of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). In Togo, women dry and smoke fish waste in ovens, and mill it into fine powder. This is sold as feed for poultry and cattle and for market gardening. Through this activity, fish waste is disposed, resulting in

a clean and dry environment. In India, women were engaged in developing fishing gears and processing equipment in collaboration with an external research agency, developing a prototype that is easier for women to use. Women are gaining ground in technology development, which will benefit not only themselves but the whole household, society, and the environment.

The internet has also provided women with a new marketing outlet. There have been cases reported on how women fishers use digital platforms to sell fish directly to consumers. Digital platforms also allow women fishers and groups to communicate widely about their concerns and issues, as well as their activities and contributions, thus raising awareness about issues and amplifying their demand for gender equality. The vibrant and energetic women fishers’ narratives reach a wider audience through these platforms.

An encouraging development is that women fishers’ organizations are moving beyond fishing issues to discuss gender-based violence, health, and human trafficking issues. Earlier, there was little or no collaboration between fishers’ groups/organizations and women’s organizations. Women’s organizations focused on issues of gender-based violence and discrimination in society; these were not often discussed in fishers’ organizations. The IYFAFA workshops demonstrated how the issues that women’s organizations are working on are major concerns for fisherwomen as well. This realization creates a wider solidarity around the need for gender equality in fisheries and in society at large. In the fisheries, issues such as sex for fish have long been raised, but to formulate such issues in terms of gender-based violence and the fight against patriarchy strengthens the alliance with women’s organizations.

For years, women fishers have articulated the need for diversification of economic activities. Alternative income-generating activities in the household often support the volatile earnings from fishing. Such non-fishing activities are carried out mainly by women. Recognizing their contribution towards sustaining fishing as an occupation and demanding recognition and support for these economic activities widens the scope of fisheries as a sector and as a profession.

Women fishers have pushed forward their agenda and have made impressive gains so far. These gains show how the inclusion of women benefits the fisheries sector as a whole. Gender equality in the fisheries sector is still, however, a distant dream. In order to articulate the concerns of women fishers in the sector and to discuss the gains from gender equality and the enhanced inclusion and well-being of women, all of the four regions formulated their own action plans. Some of the common agendas are discussed below:



Returning from fishing on Kribi beach, Cameroon. It is not enough to only recognize women’s fisheries work but also acknowledge the larger contribution of women to supporting fisheries, including domestic services, and the economic diversification of these services. The role of media is important in advancing the recognition of women’s roles in the sector

**“Women knew what they wanted, they had a narrative and a vision for the future, and they wanted gender equality”**

Women’s work must be recognized and made visible. Even though progress has been made, references to women are still limited in certain forums. The recognition is still not translated into practice, and women do not always enjoy family/ community support and respect in their fishing activities. It is not enough to only recognize women’s fisheries work but also acknowledge the larger contribution of women to supporting fisheries, including domestic services, and the economic diversification of these services. The role of media is important in advancing the recognition of women’s roles in the sector.

Women’s organizations and networks must be established. Forums for women to raise their voices and support for women’s participation in fisheries governance are needed. Women’s leadership capacities need to be strengthened. Cooperatives, associations, and grassroots women’s organizations all need to be strengthened.

Capacity building is needed. Training programs in peer-to-peer learning on new technologies, and in conflict resolution are needed. Capacity building needs and access to technologies must be explored throughout the

fisheries value-chain, including in processing facilities, storage, refrigeration, packaging, hygiene, and food safety.

Data collection and research need to be strengthened for women in fisheries. Gender-disaggregated data is needed. The challenges that women in fisheries face, as well as their innovativeness need to be widely shared.

Access to services for women needs to be improved. For example, financial resources should be available for women to invest in fisheries. Health services should be accessible to address occupational health hazards among women, which are different from men. Water and sanitation services, as well as social security rights for women fishworkers, are needed.

There is a need to systematically address all forms of violence against women, including through providing improved legal protection and counseling services.

Gender-sensitive fisheries policies need to be put in place. Protection of women’s rights should be included in the law. Gender equity needs to be included in all curriculums, and educational strategies towards men on sexual violence, drug abuse, and alcoholism need to be included. ❏