

‘Ripples of renewal, Waves of change’

Empowering women in fisheries to improve livelihoods, advance food sovereignty and champion ecological stewardship

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Aqua Ecology is a grassroots framework that combines social justice, sustainability, and food sovereignty. By following this framework and supporting women in fisheries, women and their communities can enjoy improved livelihoods, health, equality, and ecology

In the backrooms of fish markets, the living rooms of fishing households, and fisheries management meetings, women are working unseen, unrecognised, and unsupported. Fisheries are male-dominated because the work is traditionally gendered, and systemic barriers make it difficult for women to participate. This negatively impacts community livelihoods, health, social justice, and ecology. Despite the lack of support, women perform important work at all levels of the fisheries value chain. Through grassroots efforts and policy changes aligned with Aqua Ecology, these women can be better supported and included, leading to improved outcomes for all.

It is well-known that women and men in fisheries tend to have different roles and responsibilities. Compared to men, women are more likely to gather shellfish from the shore and work in post-harvest roles like processing, trading, marketing, finances, and logistics. This division of labour is real, but roles are also viewed through the gender lens because of social expectations, biases, and a persistent lack of data accounting for women's contributions. A lot of post-harvest work also happens in homes rather than in public markets, which can render women's roles even less visible. As a result, men in fishing communities are often seen as providers, while women are seen as homemakers or even “fisher wives.”

Systemic barriers also make it difficult for women to fully participate in fisheries. In homes, markets, and meetings, women often have less power to make their own decisions. They also have less access to finance, information, opportunities, support systems, equipment, and land. They can face discrimination and violence, or simply not be treated as professionals. In many cultures, women are also expected to devote a lot of time on household duties on top of their paid work, saddling them with extremely heavy workloads. Women are often excluded from fisheries management, too: either entirely or by not being afforded opportunities to participate meaningfully.

Climate change compounds these inequalities. Consequently, women experience greater health and safety risks, income gaps, and food insecurity, and have more trouble recovering after climate shocks. All of these issues are made worse for women living with

intersecting inequalities in areas such as age, ethnicity, class, nationality, disability, and sexuality.

Women's work and achievements, at all levels of fisheries: from harvesting to management, often get overlooked. This invisibilisation, in addition to the weak support they receive, harms women and their communities. Livelihoods are affected, as women end up working jobs that are unpaid or poorly paid. This in turn contributes to the greater incidence of low incomes and high poverty rates among women compared to men – disparities made worse when industrial fishing displaces them into even lower-paying jobs.

Women also suffer more from malnutrition and food insecurity, which can impact their health and further limit livelihood opportunities. Malnutrition in particular can plague children and communities for generations. In terms of social justice benchmarks, fishing communities often exhibit low achievement rates in empowerment and gender equality. In addition, there are also environmental concerns that accompany the disregarding and exclusion of women in fishing communities, since they often have specialised ecological knowledge and skills.

Change is, therefore, needed in order to ensure that women can be empowered, systemic barriers can be challenged, and women's roles can gain their due recognition and become more formalised. To meet these goals, the idea of ‘Aqua Ecology’ can be used to support women, their communities, and their natural environments. Aqua Ecology is a grassroots framework that brings together sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty in fisheries. It empowers fishing communities to take up leadership roles, strengthen their local economies, defend traditional knowledge, and practice sustainable fishing. Recognising and supporting women is an important part of this framework.

At the grassroots level, communities can come together to work towards these goals. Women living within food systems can empower and support one another, with the help of communities and civil society organizations. This kind of capacity-building action is already happening around the world, and lessons can be learned from ongoing community efforts in Sri Lanka and Canada.



Traditional fishing boats on a beach in Matara district, Sri Lanka. Women have limited access to boats like these, as well as resources like finances, equipment, and support systems

In rural Sri Lanka, many groups of women have come together to pool money so that members can access loans when they are in need. These groups empower women living within food systems to increase their access to resources, build strong networks, and develop new skills. On top of saving money, they organize community fundraisers and run small businesses that sell homemade foods or crafts. One group in Kurunegala district even harvests rice together and is saving up to buy their own land. In addition to supporting each other, these women's groups strengthen their communities by hosting events to promote food security, and distribute food aid to their neighbours. Such contributions are especially impactful, as was demonstrated most recently following the devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah in late 2025.

While these groups organize and manage their own activities, they can, and do, receive support from non-governmental and non-profit organizations. For example, Sri Lanka's National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) supports several women's groups by

donating money, physical goods, and emergency aid, and offering practical advice. NAFSO's district coordinators follow up with women's groups regularly to assess their progress and offer support. While the women continue to struggle, they are seeing positive outcomes like increased savings, growing businesses, and positive community engagement. These groups are good examples of how women in food systems can become empowered to increase their capacity, agency, and access to resources while supporting their communities. The support they receive from NAFSO also shows how civil society organizations can work to strengthen grassroots efforts.

When it comes to women's leadership in fisheries, lessons can be learned from a case study led by Dr. Sarah Harper in 2018. The study explores how, in 2015, there was a crisis in British Columbia, Canada, when stocks of Pacific herring were almost depleted due to industrial fishing. In response, women from the Heiltsuk First Nation led grassroots efforts that pressured the Canadian government to co-manage fisheries with Indigenous communities. To boost their credibility, Heiltsuk women reclaimed their traditional roles as respected leaders, mothers, caretakers, teachers, and healers. This made it clear that they were not just defending fish, but the wellbeing of their children, future generations, ecosystems, and culture. Women led protests, and played important roles in communication, planning, fundraising, networking, and youth engagement. Their efforts ultimately led to positive, systems-level change, and highlighted how women can use their traditional roles to increase legitimacy, authority and credibility in fisheries. As well, the episode demonstrated how including and respecting women in leadership roles can lead to food systems that are more just, equitable and sustainable.

In sum, to complement community efforts, governments and partner actors should work to empower, support, and include women in fisheries. This can involve:

- Investing in girls' and women's education
- Developing training programmes and financial services for women entrepreneurs
- Increasing women's access to equipment
- Including women in communication materials to increase their visibility
- Building capacity among stakeholders to consider gender when developing policies and funding projects
- Ensuring that ministries relevant to fisheries have strong gender equality policies
- Mainstreaming gender into all policies and programmes
- Collecting and analysing gender-sensitive data

- Researching women's roles and impacts in fisheries
- Balancing empowerment efforts with the realities of women's household duties to avoid increasing their workloads to unsustainable levels

Through community efforts and policy changes, women's roles in fisheries can become more inclusive, visible and appreciated. Women must be empowered and supported, systemic

barriers must be challenged and surmounted, and women's roles must be studied and showcased. 

This article was informed by published literature on women in fisheries, including the Heiltsuk case study: https://www.aquaculturewithoutfrontiers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Harper2018_Article_IndigenousWomenRespondToFisher.pdf