

Gender equality for better environmental outcomes

Addressing gender inequality in fisheries value chains can lead to a variety of positive outcomes, including environmental ones

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The sustainable seafood movement, composed predominantly of environmental non-profit organizations based in the global North and Latin America, has the lofty goal of improving the environmental sustainability and social responsibility of global seafood production. The leading membership organization of NGOs in the movement, the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, has set a collective goal that “by 2030, at least 75 percent of global seafood production is environmentally sustainable or making verifiable improvement and safeguards are in place to ensure social responsibility.” Similar

goals have been set by individual organizations and alliances working to ensure environmental sustainability in seafood production.

Since the beginning of the sustainable seafood movement more than 20 years ago, collective efforts of fishers, NGOs, academics, scientists, government agencies, and the philanthropic community have led to 35 percent of global seafood production being either certified by a certification scheme like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), rated by a ratings organization like Seafood Watch, or in a Fishery Improvement Project (FIP). This information is available on the Certification

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Sao Jorge Island at the Santa Catarina factory in the Azores, Portugal. By 2030, at least 75 percent of global seafood production is environmentally sustainable or making verifiable improvement and safeguards are in place to ensure social responsibility

and Ratings Collaboration's Sustainable Seafood Data Tool, which consolidates data from five global programmes to provide NGOs and businesses a more comprehensive look at seafood sustainability. Many of these fisheries and farms were already well on their way to environmental sustainability, if not already meeting the bar. If we are to reach the goal set by the seafood community by 2030, more than double the amount of global seafood production should be certified, rated, or in a FIP in less than half the time. The question is "how?" Is building gender equality and women's empowerment the answer?

The short answer is "yes", yet, as with all complex problems, the solutions are complicated and multifaceted. The goal of the sustainable seafood movement was drafted in line with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Global Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - an "urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership." SDG14 - Life Below Water - contains a set of subgoals that guides many of the activities of marine conservation organizations working to increase the volume of sustainable seafood and accelerate ocean conservation. SDG5 - Gender Equality - is a cross-cutting theme of the SDGs and is considered an enabler and an accelerator of the other goals and is a key element that is not broadly integrated into the strategies of the seafood movement's collective, and individual, activities to achieve SDG14.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, approximately 50 percent of people working in global seafood production are women; however, women's contributions to the sector remain largely unacknowledged and their voices in decision-making and management of the resources are seldom heard or valued. The greatest challenges facing our ocean - climate change, illegal fish harvest, social injustice, environmental degradation - disproportionately affect women, and solutions that fail to prioritize those most affected are not viable. Because no explicit gender equality target lies within SDG14, the onus to integrate gender transformative approaches into strategies to achieve better environmental outcomes lies with the implementers of environmental sustainability initiatives.

The comprehensive report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "Advancing Gender in the Environment: Gender in Fisheries - A Sea of Opportunities" provides a series of reasons why gender matters in fisheries, outlines the linkages between gender equality and sustainable fisheries management, and provides

recommendations and strategic interventions for addressing gender in fisheries. Gender in fisheries matters because "a growing body of evidence suggests that addressing gender issues and integrating women's empowerment interventions into conservation result in improved governance and ecological results." In sum, women's engagement strengthens fisheries management. The report also emphasizes that gender-based violence (GBV) is a key issue and a specific concern in the fisheries sector.

Environmental outcomes are linked to gender-based violence (GBV). As mentioned above, women generally lack access to decision-making discussions around fisheries management. The absence of women's voices in these discussions "cyclically limits opportunities for gender-responsive action, including informing conservation and addressing gender-based violence," according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) paper, "Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality." Men who fish must travel farther and stay out at sea longer when fisheries are in crisis and resources depleted. Often, social norms that perpetuate toxic masculinity dictate that they must reassert their dominance in the home upon their return, which could lead to increased GBV.

Addressing gender inequality in fisheries value chains can lead to a variety of positive outcomes, including environmental ones. In the paper "Fish Losses for Whom? A Gendered Assessment of Post-Harvest Losses in the Barotse Floodplain Fishery, Zambia," the authors examine post-harvest fish losses in western Zambia through a gender lens. They uncover that "female processors lost three times the mass of their fish consignments compared to male processors" and conclude that "addressing unequal gender relations in value chains, whilst also promoting the use of loss-reducing technologies, could increase fish supply and food security in small-scale fisheries." The authors identify the causes of gender gaps in post-harvest production and reiterate that reducing loss is an important strategy to enhance food and nutrition security and environmental sustainability. Froukje Kruijssen, Senior Advisor at the Royal Tropical Institute found this assertion to be true in a 2017 interview for CGIAR about why gender equality matters in fisheries and aquaculture, "Women do the majority of postharvest activities, and this is the stage when quality losses often occur because there is no access to electricity for refrigeration and storage of fish. These losses cause lower incomes for traders and retailers." In addition, it can be surmised that increased fish losses could potentially lead to increased exploitation of fisheries resources to make up

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for these losses, therefore, addressing the root cause, gender inequality, could reduce pressure on the resource.

It has been shown that improved environmental performance leads to more equality. According to data recently released by IUCN, “Investing in environmental sustainability also offers critical pathways for achieving global goals on gender equality... Studies and field experiences alike confirm that the meaningful, visible, full, and effective participation and leadership of women in environmental and conservation efforts can increase women’s political, economic, social and personal empowerment.” However, progress on increasing the number of women in leadership positions is painfully slow and studies show that “1 of 71 major seafood companies have women CEOs and 90 percent of seafood company directorships are held by men.” Accelerating women’s access and pathways to leadership and participation in resource management decisions must be a priority.

But again, it’s complicated, and a few caveats should be mentioned. “Women should be involved in ocean management because they bring motherly care, motherly instincts and deep-rooted knowledge of ocean and ocean governance.” Alifereti Tawake, member of the founding Coordination Council of the locally-managed Marine Area Network (LMMA network).

Since time immemorial, women have been cast as nurturers and caretakers. Women tend to the children and conduct the majority of unpaid work in the home. Women, as resource collectors, are the most affected when water or firewood are scarce and when environmental degradation occurs. Women are the most affected when natural disasters strike and wreak havoc on ecosystems and communities. And women are holders of traditional knowledge, as Alifereti Tawake said. However, in building women’s empowerment and gender equality in global seafood production, we must avoid adding yet another burden - saving the planet - to already overburdened women. In their article, “Four assumptions about gender that distort how we think about climate change (and 3 ways to do better),” the authors caution that assuming that women are “innately caring and connected to the environment” means that “women get saddled with responsibility to act as saviours of their environments, families and communities. In the process, women’s labour gets doubled or tripled in the name of climate adaptation or mitigation.” We must avoid reliance on women to solve the planet’s environmental crises simply because they are considered to be nurturers and caretakers.

Jennifer Bornstein said it well in her article, “On Mother Earth and Earth Mothers: Why Environmentalism Has a Gender Problem”:

“An environmentalism that makes daily life harder for a certain segment of the population is not ethical. Romanticizing unpaid labor disregards the burdens on the populations that perform it. Ultimately, environmental change will require far more than the calls of charismatic men (and occasionally women) to return to the kitchen, or to the farm. Instead, it will be those structural and technological changes that alter the lived realities of women in developed and developing countries alike that will succeed in meaningfully, and equitably, addressing both environmental and feminist concerns.”

Elma Burnham, a woman who fishes for salmon in Alaska and founder of Strength of the Tides, points out another nuance in an interview with the Pulitzer Center about how the Covid-19 global pandemic may intensify gender inequality. Sometimes while fishing, she says, “women are expected to make the weather call and say when it’s too rough to go out fishing. That responsibility shouldn’t be exclusively up to me because I’m the female, mothering, nurturing role,” and that decisions that affect the safety of the crew should be the responsibility of the entire crew. Again, the idea that a woman - because she is considered to be nurturing and therefore can make the best decision for the safety of the crew - puts yet another heavy burden on her. This example is particularly ironic considering that women’s very presence on fishing boats has been considered bad luck - a superstition perpetuated for centuries.

Finally, it is problematic to characterize SDG5, Gender Equality, *solely* as an enabler and accelerator of all the SDGs. The authors of the paper, “Gender equality is diluted in commitments made to small-scale fisheries,” found in their research that “Policy instruments, such as the SDGs, predominantly consider gender as an accelerant to instrumental goals, rather than of inherent value” and “we must recognize that gender equality is a mainstream principle of good environmental governance.” We must recognize that gender equality is a fundamental human right.

There is more than ample evidence as to how gender equality and women’s empowerment in global fisheries and fish farms can improve environmental performance, among other notable benefits, such as food and nutrition security. The time to recognize that gender equality is central to generating better environmental outcomes is now. This recognition will center women’s voices in the creation and implementation of solutions without generating further or additional burdens. Moreover, this recognition will support fundamental human rights of all people, as everyone benefits in a gender equal world. ♣