

Women in Central America's fisheries

Women in Central America are a vital part of the fisheries supply chain but official data fails to reflect their labour

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In their 1988 book, *Women and Environment in the Third World*, Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson mention three issues that reflect the relationship between women and the small-scale fisheries (SSF) in Central America: first, how difficult it is to talk about women and SSF without ignoring the vast economic, cultural and social differences that exist among women even within a particular country and region; two, the tremendous work burden these diverse groups of women shoulder; and three, the fact that rural women have been the invisible workforce, the unacknowledged backbone of the family economy in Central America's small-scale fisheries.

As in other parts of the world, in Central America too, women are involved in the diversification of production in the fisheries sector. This has important implications for food security and food sovereignty, and the management of coastal and marine resources. Small-scale fishing is a source of food for their families, and supplements their earnings from other activities such as farming and tourism. Fish is caught, processed, consumed and sold by women along the isthmus in diverse ways.

However, given that there are very few sex-disaggregated statistics available about the number of women involved in fisheries related work, and given also the fact that it has been difficult to introduce the concept of gender to any relevant decision making platform, especially in the fishing sector, the importance of women's labour is seldom acknowledged in technical or political discussions on fishing policies and strategies. Furthermore, the data that is available fails to capture the multidimensional nature of the work done by women in the fisheries.

In Central America, as in other parts of the world, women occupy multiple roles in SSF. As ICSF's website puts it, they may be workers (paid and unpaid) within the fisheries, in pre- and post-harvest activities, including seafood processing plants; the main fishers in inland fishing and aquaculture in many countries around the world; caregivers in fishing families and communities, maintaining social networks and cultural identity; workers in non-fisheries sectors supplementing the household income from fishing, which is often erratic, or members of fish workers' movements and fishers' organizations.

However, these important roles are often overlooked when it comes to resource rights and decision making, and women's roles in small-scale fisheries continue to be hidden. In many national laws, for example, women are not considered artisanal fishers, because the definition of this activity usually excludes the pre- and post-capture activities in which women are actively involved. In most cases, the role of women in small-scale fishing communities in Central America is seen as limited to the domestic arena, and their work is hardly recognized as productive.

The following two examples of women's work in the fisheries illustrate their vital but under-recognized contribution to the economy of the sector. The first is the example of women line organizers (*lujadoras*) in Tárcoles, Costa Rica.

The organization and baiting of the fishing lines in preparation for fishing is a slow and hard job. In the *lujadoras* community, Tárcoles, located in Costa Rica's Pacific coast, this pre-capture job is the work of women

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A mollusc collector in Costa Rica. In most cases, the role of women in small-scale fishing communities in Central America is hardly recognized as productive

and young girls. It is a low paid job and the women rarely have social security backup. Remuneration is only on the basis of fishing trips undertaken and dependent upon the catch. Because of these uncertainties, the job is not highly valued. Nevertheless, a large number of the *lujadoras* are also heads of households. In addition to the low pay, the women have no legal or social support, and most of them are not part of any union or cooperative that could help to protect their interests and facilitate their access to various support systems.

The second example is the impact of the closure of shrimp trawling on women. A study done by CoopeSoliDar R.L and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on decent work and fisheries in Costa Rica interviewed women who used to work in two shrimp peeling enterprises in the province of Puntarenas. The women were between 40 and 60 years of age, and their work involved the peeling and packaging of shrimp. They were heads of their families. Recently, the closure of the companies and moving of the shrimp fleets to the neighbouring Nicaragua left the women unemployed. They had been engaged in the work since they were young girls, some as young mothers needing the work to maintain their families. In some cases of women with children, the approval of child welfare authorities had been necessary in order for the women to enter this work. The sudden closure of the companies stripped from families their main wage earners.

These two examples underscore the importance of women's productive work in the fisheries sector. However, this is all but ignored in the official statistics. In 2011, the structural census, OSPESCA, mentioned that "the purpose of studying the family context is to know how many people depend economically from fishing according to the size of homes, the generational exchange that has been happening in fisheries and the economic wellbeing reached by the families according to their access to education, work and house".

Thus, the 'family context' is where most statistics on women in fisheries are included. The importance of considering women's participation in fishing is not recognized in the census exercise. The potential for women to contribute through their work to new ideas and efforts on issues of development, conservation, sustainable fishing,

and adaptation to new threats such as climate change is totally ignored.

The census mentions that small-scale fishing is done primarily by men in Central America (92.5 per cent of regional activity) and limits the contribution of women to just 7.5 per cent. Women are usually involved in the processing and commercialization, and during the last years have started taking positions in the organization and leadership of cooperatives and other forms of association both of only male fishers and mixed fishing groups. Also, some are becoming intermediaries in fish selling; some own boats, administer restaurants, and in some countries, go out to fish with their husbands and sons. However, when it comes to the census, the role of women in fishing is seen as a very small part of the effort.

The rhetoric of most cooperation agencies and governments emphasizes the importance of gender mainstreaming as being fundamental to empowering women, and recognizing their true contribution to the economy. This would mean incorporating the needs and perception of both men and women in the development agenda—which is far from being the case in Central America. The absence of a gender perspective in policy documents is especially evident in the small-scale fishing sector, both at the continental and the marine and coastal levels.

As an example of the non-inclusion of a women's agenda, the new Integration Policy for fishing and aquaculture in the Central American isthmus (2015-2025) approved in 2015 by all the ministries in charge in the region, explicitly mentions women in fisheries only once in the following context:

"VI.5.12. In relation to gender, the development of capacities for the commercialization and management of financial assets and credit: training and education, organizational strengthening, and the major involvement of women in the associations related to small-scale fishing and aquaculture."

No agenda for mainstreaming of gender in fisheries is included in the document. There is, however, the hope that the mention of the Voluntary Guidelines, and its integration in this policy, will give a better opportunity to include gender aspects in fisheries in a more integrated and serious way:

"VI.5.6. The Voluntary Guidelines for securing the sustainability of small-scale

A human rights based approach to fisheries must include a focus on their rights as women.

fisheries in the context of food security and eradication of poverty approved by FAO, will be taken into account in the planning related to small scale fisheries in the SICA countries, and the participation of the Confederation of Artisanal Fishers of Central America, and other regional groups of civil society related to small-scale fishers.”

The foregoing is illustrative of how, despite the stated goal of gender mainstreaming, women remain invisible for the most part in the fisheries sector. Their absence from all processes of policy and planning results in devaluing their work, excluding their contributions from the enumeration of statistics for the sector, and not including specific recommendations that help in increasing their share within the economy of the fishing sector.

In the context, certain recommendations may be made for inclusion in future policy documents for fisheries in Central America.

The contribution of women in fisheries and within the community must be legally recognized along with the multidimensional nature of their work. This recognition should translate into effective measures such as credit access, funding for women-led projects, as well as advocacy campaigns, among other means.

The exploitation of women in their workplace must be stopped, and social security as well as unemployment and insurance benefits must be extended for women and their families. Domestic and sexual violence must be eliminated. Further, an environment must be created that supports women to register their organizations so that they have the necessary means to access credit and participate in development programmes, and which makes their work visible in the economic and political sphere.

The issue of child labour in Central America’s fisheries hardly receives the attention it deserves. At a minimum, the international conventions for the elimination of child labour in fisheries and aquaculture, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including with respect to informal sector household chores, must be implemented. Similarly, legislation governing and regulating child labour through the use of incentives, disincentives and enforcement mechanisms must also be implemented.

Along with social and economic measures, the sustainable use and conservation of fishing resources must be promoted. Towards this end, several steps may be taken. The first would be to promote ecosystem based marine and coastal management, and to recognize and promote sustainable use as a valid strategy for the conservation of natural resources. The role of women in the management of such zones and areas is vital, and so also is their participation in programmes focusing on the conservation and restoration of coastal ecosystems. Therefore, gender specific proposals to permit women and women’s organizations to implement their ideas and actions related to conservation and sustainable fisheries practices are necessary.

Information exchange among women in the fisheries is necessary, together with training programmes for communities, especially gender related training that enable fishing communities to carry out their own surveys and produce their own documents, so that they can engage in responsible management of their resources.

The protocol for identifying areas that meet the criteria for Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) must include traditional knowledge as well as scientific and technical expertise. This should be done with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge (including women). Indigenous peoples and local communities must be involved in the process of describing EBSAs, by inviting them to regional workshops and consultations.

These processes must contemplate social and cultural information relevant to any subsequent step in the process of selecting conservation and management measures. Subsidies for industrial fishing fleets must be eliminated, and community based governance models must be put into place for marine protected areas. The participation of fisherwoman must be promoted in all relevant forums to discuss global and national actions concerning the conservation of marine ecosystems. The FAO International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries must be widely recognized and put into practice. Clearly, the road ahead for women in the fisheries in Central America is a long one, but the hope lies in the fact that women are getting organized; they are ready to take on this challenge and walk the long road a step and a time! ❏