

Counting on Women

At the intersection of gender, fisheries, and economics are systemic anomalies that mask the cost of fish production by discounting or underestimating women's labour

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Over 250 million people are involved in global marine fisheries. This estimate includes women and men, but it is difficult to determine contributions by gender because the fisheries sector, like many other natural resource sectors, lacks comprehensive sex-disaggregated data. While some, such as the World Bank, suggest that women account for nearly half of the global fisheries workforce, this may be an underestimate because many countries continue to overlook the labour contributions by women in fisheries. This is partly due to the many informal activities that women are involved in that contribute to fishing operations, but may also be attributable to sampling bias and overall poor accounting. In economic terms, the underestimation of women's labour in fisheries can lead us to understate the costs of fishing, while overstating and oversimplifying their economic benefits.

The field of economics promises approaches and tools to understand what determines the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services such as food, energy, transportation and healthcare. However, feminist economists have long criticized these approaches for overlooking many important factors that contribute to this productivity, including unpaid,

informal, and care work. This type of work is disproportionately undertaken by women. Looking specifically to the fisheries sector, and along the fish value chain, the contributions by women are often overlooked when the focus is only on market values. For example, women bring tremendous value to the seafood industry often through informal activities such as small-scale processing, transportation, and marketing; they contribute substantially to food security through gleaning and subsistence fishing activities; and they provide significantly to local and national economies. National accounting systems do not adequately capture this work, and fisheries accounting systems exacerbate this by overlooking catches by women and the value associated with them. On average, fisheries represent approximately one to three per cent of the national gross domestic product (GDP) but this is based mostly on market values, and primarily, on the catch from large-scale commercial fisheries. A comprehensive estimate of fisheries catches including small- and large-scale, commercial and subsistence catches, and including the full range of inputs by men and women, would provide a more complete picture of the fisheries economy, going beyond GDP to explain in broader terms the value of fisheries to the economy and to account for previously overlooked contributions by women.

Fisheries economics has traditionally concerned itself with balancing the costs of fishing such as labour, fuel, gear, equipment repair, and maintenance, with the money earned from fishing. While this simple model can help explain the behaviour of fishers, and in particular, determine if it is worthwhile for them to continue fishing, it fails to account for so called 'informal inputs' into fishing operations. Informal inputs could include, for example, gear repair, bookkeeping and provisioning for fishing trips, and since these often consist of unpaid labour these are inputs that can offset fishing costs, resulting in what looks like economic efficiency. In this way, the true costs of fishing are masked, as there are considerable inputs that are not necessarily included in cost assessments, and hence in determining whether a fishery is profitable or not. This is particularly relevant in a small-scale fisheries context, especially in light of the many ways that women contribute to fishing operations, often characterized as informal or support roles. In short, women reduce the perceived cost of

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A woman and man processing sea cucumber and crab catch on the island of Batasan in the Central Philippines. Women in fisheries provide multiple benefits to society

fishing by providing a supply of informal and unpaid labour.

Women's often unpaid and undervalued labour is also important to consider when examining the other half of the economic equation: the income earned. Industrial fisheries rely heavily on the labour inputs of women in processing factories, while small-scale fisheries in many parts of the world, for example, West Africa, rely on women via processing, marketing and distribution of fish to transform fish into monetary value. In these market based activities, however, men and women are not always compensated equally even for the same activities, with women often earning less. In contexts where women have limited access to fisheries resources and an unequal distribution of benefits, women in fishing communities remain dependent on their husbands or male relatives, reinforcing normative gender roles at the household level. The formal recognition of women's fisheries labour has also proven to be important in contexts where national policy gives financial support to fishers, either through unemployment insurance or retirement benefits. For example, in France, women pushed to have their informal labour in the artisanal fisheries recognized so that they could access the benefits of a personal retirement plan that was available to their spouses.

A gender income disparity can also have larger family, community, and national level impacts because women and men often use income in different ways. In many parts of the world women's income largely goes toward household food and children's education. Therefore, reducing women's access to fisheries resources or the necessary resources to develop alternative livelihoods may further impoverish fishing communities where fisheries-related income, and often that of women, contributes directly towards health and education. Research reveals that improved fishing incomes for only men does not necessarily benefit entire households, as the benefits may not be evenly distributed.

Women around the world are often economically disadvantaged because of restricted property rights, in terms of land and asset ownership and inheritance, which limits the ability of women to access credit and accumulate capital. This in turn affects their bargaining power with negative effects on decision-making power within and outside households, communities, and institutions. How women participate in the fisheries economy is influenced by cultural, legal and policy contexts that can often hinder their

access to fisheries resources and markets. For example, in Norway, quota systems that were implemented to limit the number of fishers favoured full time and larger scale fishers, while disenfranchising women who were more likely to work part time from smaller boats. In other cases, such as in the Philippines, management measures such as Marine Protected Areas may be placed in intertidal fishing areas traditionally used by women. In these cases, associated measures are needed to ensure women have equal access to fisheries resources and benefits, as well as a respected voice in decision making.

Beyond access to fishing, access to markets can also be a key factor in equitable participation in fisheries and the distribution of related benefits. Women's participation in fish marketing varies widely and is often based on interacting cultural and economic contexts. For example, in Ghana, women are boat owners and largely control fish pricing, and hence have a strong economic influence on the fishery. By contrast, in Bangladesh, very few women participate in the markets and must rely on male relatives to sell any catch. In other cases, such as in Kenya, women and men participate in fish marketing, but women only have access to the smaller and less valued catch, while men market the larger and more profitable fish.

Fisheries and the economies in which they operate are not static, and new ecological and economic realities can surmount entrenched gender roles. For example, as fish stocks decline, fish are harder to catch, boats often need to go farther afield and require more fuel. This drives fishing costs up. To recoup the rising costs of fishing, hired crew might then be replaced by a family member, say, the captain's wife or sister. While there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest this is a widely used strategy, there is a lack of data to highlight its prevalence. In other more extreme cases, resource degradation coupled with poverty has been met with a rise in "fish for sex" transactions, as women use alternative strategies to access the fish they need for their livelihood. This in turn has been linked to increases in the spread of HIV and AIDS in fishing communities with even farther reaching social and economic impacts.

Furthermore, limited alternative livelihood opportunities in many fishing communities forces both men and women to seek work outside the community. Mobility of labour has led to cases where remittance incomes are an important component of rural livelihoods. With limited opportunities for livelihood diversification in many rural

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fishing communities, women often migrate to find work elsewhere and send their income back to the fishing communities to support their brothers', fathers' or husbands' fishing operations as a means to acquire capital inputs but also to compensate for diminishing returns as fish stocks decline. Remittance income earning opportunities for women in particular can also act to increase status and power within the household and community, but this needs further analysis to fully understand the impact of remittance income in a fisheries context.

Women in fisheries provide multiple benefits to society—labour, food, economic stimulus and so on—while also receiving

individual benefits from their involvement in fisheries, such as income, food, empowerment and bargaining power. Both micro- and macro-economic scales of analysis are relevant to a gender approach. The dynamics of gender can lead to patterns of differentiated benefits within households, but also at larger scales, as a result of macro-economic policies and gender-blind fisheries policies. There is considerable opportunity to research and gain insights at the intersection of gender, fisheries and economics, including some of the themes highlighted here, to better understand gender inequality in the fisheries sector and to look for avenues to reduce such inequalities. ■