

# Unseen and unheard

## The struggles of women in the small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka unveil their vital yet overlooked roles

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“There are no abstract women, whose lives are shaped only or primarily by their gender; in the real world, women have a place in the class, socio-economic, racial and ethnic structures within capitalist social formations.” (Martha A. Gimenez)

In Sri Lanka’s small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector, women play a thousand invisible roles. They are essential to the survival of the sector. Mainly, fisherwomen perform a range of tasks, including supporting post- and pre-harvest activities, while managing

household responsibilities. In other words, they serve as the invisible backbone of the fishing industry, meticulously repairing gear and preparing essential supplies to support people before they head out to sea. During the post-harvest phase, women take on the task of sorting, drying, processing, and selling fish. The 2022 Fisheries Statistics show that the inland fisheries and aquaculture sector in Sri Lanka has a notable number of women, with 3,060 working in inland fisheries and 5,302 in aquaculture. In the broader marine fisheries

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In Sri Lanka, the economic crisis left many without jobs and a source of income. Various policy obstacles hamper effective empowerment and inclusion of women fishers in Sri Lanka

sector, 223,490 men and women were reported active as fishers. This figure includes full-time, part-time, intermittent, and other fish workers not elsewhere classified, highlighting the extensive and diversified engagement of coastal communities in the fisheries industry in different capacities.

In the Sri Lankan context, when considering the issues faced by fisherwomen, they experience an array of interconnected challenges rooted in both policy structural weaknesses and entrenched socio-cultural norms. Despite their important contributions to various pre- and post-harvest fisheries activities, their work remains predominantly informal and underappreciated, with minimal recognition within national policy frameworks. Sometimes, they are excluded from decision-making bodies such as fisheries cooperative societies, limiting their participation in resource governance and access to related benefits. Additionally, fisherwomen encounter significant barriers in accessing credit facilities, training services, and social protection. Gender-specific labour divisions, deep-seated patriarchal norms in communities, and limited mobility continue to undermine their economic empowerment and leadership potential. The absence of gender-disaggregated data and gender-responsive policy actions enhances their marginalization, rendering their needs invisible in fisheries development and planning. As a result, fisherwomen remain disproportionately vulnerable to livelihood insecurity, climate change, and environmental degradation. Furthermore, women are marginalized through cultural frameworks and institutional practices. A common belief in the fishing industry is that “Fishing is a job for men, not for women.” Therefore, their exclusion from management institutions and official statistics reinforces the misconception that the fishing industry is an exclusively male domain. Despite their significant contributions, women in coastal communities can be identified as “invisible figures” in policy discourse and fisheries governance. As a consequence of these systemic challenges, many women migrate for foreign employment, often leading to the disintegration of family bonds and the breakdown of cohesion within their communities. This is because a family without a “mother” in Sri Lankan society is indirectly linked to other social problems. Indirect problems arise through children becoming addicted to drugs and dropping out of school, child marriages, and an increase in sexual abuse. In addition, the meagre earnings of fisherwomen are often

insufficient to sustain household livelihoods, possibly leading to involvement in illegal employment such as prostitution. When we look closely, this situation is not simply a matter of individual hardship but a structural social problem embedded in capitalist and patriarchal systems that prioritize profit over human welfare and gender equality. The social problems arising from this dynamic, such as family breakdown and youth vulnerability, are side effects of deep systemic inequalities and gender-based exploitation and neglect of women that capitalism perpetuates. One of the underlying factors behind all these problems is that colonial rule established male power structures that gave men legal and economic privileges, favouring them over women in resource control and governance. This historical foundation serves as the backbone of gender marginalization and even today creates significant barriers to the formal recognition and equitable inclusion of fisherwomen in various sectors, including the fisheries sector in Sri Lanka and other Asian countries.

When focusing on the policy framework that emphasizes the needs and rights of women fishers, Sri Lanka has no specific policy addressing women fishers directly. However, the National Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act No. 2 of 1996 and Amendment Act No. 35 of 2013 provide an integral framework in which fishing communities, including women, are involved in decision-making regarding fisheries management. Further, the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy seeks to enhance inclusive growth of the sector in line with the general economic and social goals of the government. However, various policy obstacles hamper effective empowerment and inclusion of women fishers in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, the use of gender-neutral language in current policies tends to ignore the particular roles, challenges, and needs of women within the sector, thereby concealing their contributions. In addition, the lack of adequate representation of fisherwomen in fisheries cooperatives and decision-making bodies limits their influence on resource management, development planning, and policy implementation. Structural and cultural barriers also contribute substantially to the relative exclusion of women from leadership roles, reinforcing gender disparities. Access to financial capital, educational training, and extension services remains disproportionately inadequate for women living in fisheries communities. Without specialized interventions or support systems addressing the gender component, fisherwomen are excluded

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from adequately benefiting from livelihood improvement programs, credit facilities, or technological advancements. Furthermore, the scarcity of gender-disaggregated data on the labour contributions and socio-economic roles of women fishers makes it harder to formulate evidence-based policy. Moreover, land and coastal resource tenure rights are predominantly held by men, restricting women's autonomy and their legal status in obtaining essential resources important for their livelihoods. Current legislation and practice tend not to acknowledge these gender inequalities, exposing female fishers to greater economic shocks and climate-related vulnerabilities.

Amidst the ongoing policy gaps in visioning and supporting fisherwomen, Sri Lankan Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as a viable force of change bridging the divide between invisible grassroots realities and the vision of mainstream, gender-sensitive development. NGOs such as the grassroots-level National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO) have played a key role in tackling the structural issues of fisherwomen at the local level. These organizations serve as change facilitators and champions enabling women to assert their rights, demand recognition, and engage more meaningfully in fisheries governance. NAFSO, for example, has encouraged the establishment of women-headed fisheries committees and community-based organizations in both coastal and inland fishing communities, thereby providing safe spaces for fisherwomen to organize, interact, and develop collective bargaining strength. This has involved capacity development for fisherwomen in leadership, sustainable fisheries, and economic diversification through value addition and small enterprise development. These initiatives not only upgrade women's skills and earnings but also enable them to move from informal, devalued positions to accepted and valued participants in the industry. NGOs also promote gender equality and social justice awareness among fishing communities, questioning discriminatory cultural norms and encouraging mutual household and fishery activity responsibilities. Further, these organizations have actively supported gender inclusion in decision-making bodies, including resource management committees and fisheries cooperatives, through lobbying government institutions and convening community leaders and policymakers for discussion. NGOs have been fundamental in reconstructing social

networks and enabling trauma healing, especially among fisherwomen in conflict and displacement-affected communities in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Through these activities, NGOs provide not only short-term protection and assistance but also long-term structural change through policy dialogue, advocacy, and pressure for gender-responsive fisheries policies. Their actions powerfully reaffirm the capacity of civil society to make the voice of fisherwomen heard and their contributions no longer invisible but valued and safeguarded in Sri Lanka's fisheries.

Therefore, addressing fisherwomen's challenges in Sri Lanka requires an inclusive, context-sensitive solution combining practical interventions, policy change, and enhanced community-based management. Practically, it is necessary to increase fisherwomen's access to skill development, finance, and market opportunities through specially designed training modules, credit facilities, and value-addition production assistance. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) need empowerment to become inclusive platforms for active women's participation in fisheries management, decision-making, and resource use. This involves transforming existing CBO institutions to adopt gender-sensitive leadership structures and women's representation in leadership. At the policy level, immediate action is needed to mainstream gender concerns into national fisheries policy by developing a stand-alone gender policy for the fisheries sector, supported by gender-disaggregated data and inclusive planning exercises. Legislation and regulation must be amended to open doors to women's participation in fisheries cooperatives and management committees to allow their voices to inform the future of the industry. Besides, there is a need to enhance inter-agency coordination among ministries, local authorities, and civil society to build consensus on tackling social protection, climate resilience, and livelihood diversification among fisherwomen. In addition, to empower women fishers, it is essential to strengthen collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and grassroots movements. These partnerships can enhance capacity building, amplify women's voices, and ensure implementation of gender-responsive policies. Such coordinated efforts will promote inclusive fisheries governance and sustainable community development.

Mainly, the empowerment of fisherwomen in Sri Lanka is more than a matter of social justice; it is an imperative step toward achieving

a sustainable and inclusive fisheries industry. By achieving a required equilibrium of grassroots mobilization, conducive policies, financial allocation, and institutional dedication, the value and strength of fisherwomen can be duly respected, estimated, and utilized toward the growth of coastal communities and the country as a whole. Lastly, we need

to rethink this logically: fisherwomen are not merely demanding to fish in competition with fishermen. Rather, they emphasize the need to create an enabling environment that values their unique skills and contributions, empowers them, and supports their ability to manage risks throughout the entire fisheries supply chain, from harvest to market. ❧

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