

# Endangered livelihoods

**AKTEA, the European network of women in fisheries is calling for an end to discrimination against women in the sector, with a specific focus on *mariscadoras*, who are hard hit by climate and environmental challenges**

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**W**omen in fisheries and aquaculture in Europe demand an end to daily discrimination in harbours and on vessels, as well as the recognition of spouses' and partners' contributions to fisheries enterprises. Women's organizations are calling for equal access to jobs, ensuring maritime schools and fishing vessels are open to women. Improved working conditions — modern vessels with appropriate facilities — would benefit all crew members. Protective workwear must be adapted to women's bodies for safety and efficiency. Women's inclusion in fishing crews could help address labour shortages, and targeted subsidies should support companies hiring women. Spouses and partners deserve

legal recognition, and maternity leave policies must reflect the physical demands of the job.

Traditional female jobs, such as shellfish gathering on foot in Galicia, must also be protected from environmental degradation caused by climate change and land-based pollution. The challenges facing women in the sector are particularly visible in Galicia, Spain, where women shellfish gatherers, known as *mariscadoras*, play a central role in coastal communities, yet remain excluded from decision-making and support systems. A growing crisis in Galician shellfish beds has only deepened these inequalities.

The year 2024 has been particularly challenging for artisanal shellfish harvesting

VIRGINIE DE ROCQUIGNY



Woman shellfish gatherer in Galicia, Spain. The current eligibility criteria have left many *mariscadoras* without support, forcing them to continue paying their social security contributions despite having no income

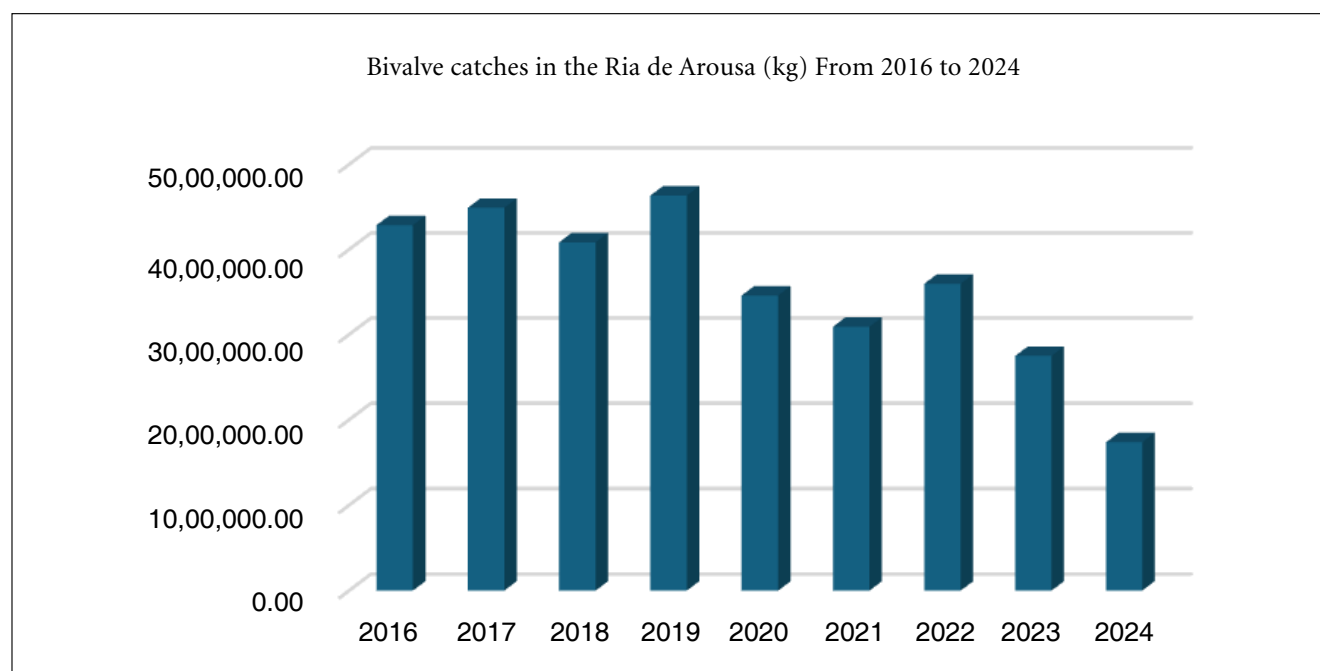


Chart: prepared by the authors with data from Galicia region. The year 2024 has been particularly challenging for artisanal shellfish harvesting in Galicia, due mainly to the high mortality of bivalve mollusks

in Galicia, due mainly to the high mortality of bivalve mollusks. The heavy rains recorded between October and November 2023 appear to have been the main cause, affecting shellfish already weakened by rising water temperatures. Meteorological reports confirm that in some areas, rainfall exceeded 1,000 litres per square metre — 127% more than usual. The combination of accumulated rainfall and increased river flow into the *ria* (coastal inlet) led to a sharp drop in salinity, severely impacting mollusk populations and, consequently, the coastal communities that depend on their harvest.

This severe shellfish crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of a sector fundamental to Galicia's economy. It has also highlighted the urgent need for effective management that prioritizes sustainability, the preservation of *rias*, responsible use of fishery resources, and the full participation of all stakeholders involved in this activity, particularly women.

The decline in estuary productivity has been evident for some time, but rising market prices had maintained the incomes of *cofradías* (fishing guilds) and shellfish harvesters, keeping concerns at bay. However, in 2024, most of the *cofradías* in the Arousa estuary, facing extreme shortages due to the mass die-off, requested a cessation of activity. The forced cessation benefit is a specific protection system for self-employed maritime workers, managed by the *Instituto Social de la Marina* (ISM). In addition to providing a monthly financial benefit, the ISM also covers social security contributions.

Throughout the *ria*, only the *cofradías* of O Grove and Cambados continued shellfish gathering in 2024. While most harvesters waited until the end of the Christmas season to take advantage of higher prices, some, such as the *cofradías* of Vilanova de Arousa, requested a cessation of activity as early as November 2023. The crisis also affected on-foot women shellfish gatherers, the *mariscadoras*, from the *ria* of Pontevedra (Pontevedra and Lourizán *cofradías*), the *ria* of Vigo (Arcade and Redondela *cofradía*), and several *cofradías* in the northern part of A Coruña province, including Cariño and Camariñas.

It is important to note that on-foot shellfish gathering in Galicia is an activity predominantly carried out by women. As a result, this crisis has disproportionately affected *mariscadoras*, particularly as they remain excluded from leadership positions and from negotiations with the authorities responsible for managing the sector, such as the regional government, which has full jurisdiction over shellfish gathering, and the national government, which oversees the social protection system for maritime workers and the cessation benefits. These benefits, equivalent to unemployment support, are included in the monthly contributions that *mariscadoras* pay to the Instituto Social de la Marina (ISM). However, the current eligibility criteria have left many *mariscadoras* without support, forcing them to continue paying their Social Security contributions despite having no income.

One of the requirements for receiving cessation benefits is to have contributed for

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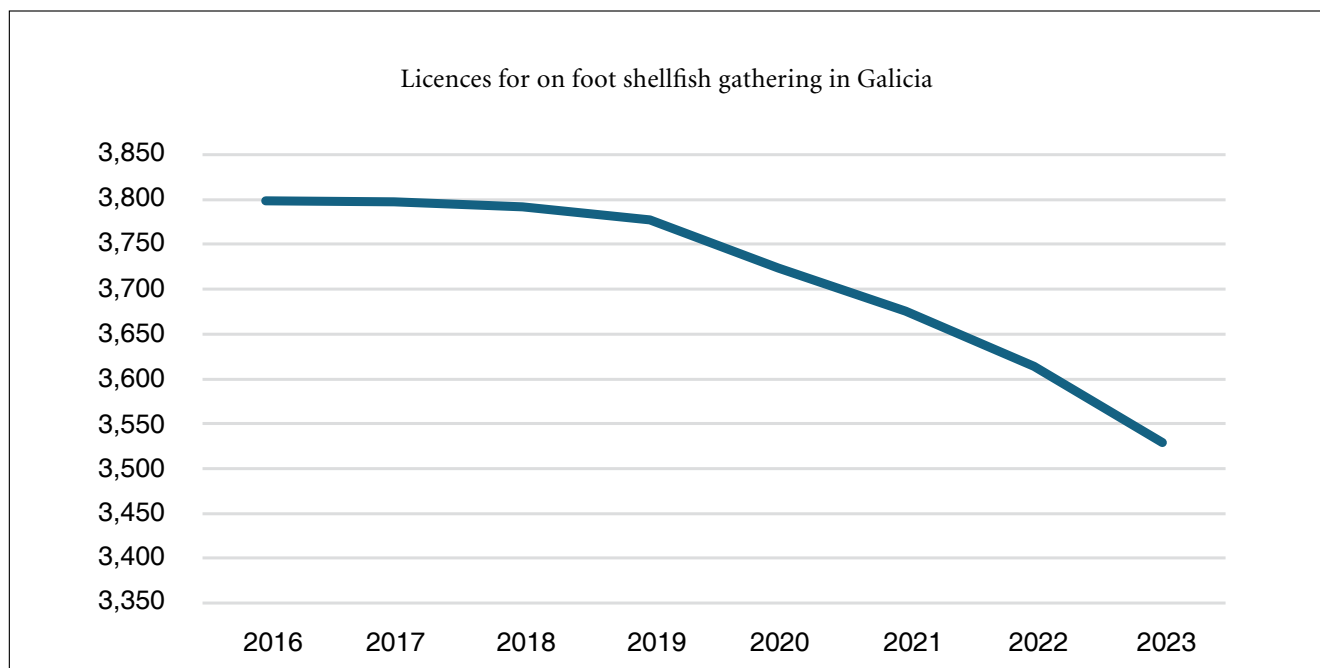


Chart: prepared by the authors with data from Galician Institute of Statistics (IGE). Shellfish harvesting is no longer a reliable source of income, and the current social protection system does not reflect the realities of people working in the industry

at least twelve months within the previous 48 months. The length of time a harvester can receive benefits is determined by their contribution history. The result is that newly registered *mariscadoras* are left without financial support or receive benefits for a significantly shorter period. It is important to acknowledge that these women are subjected to mandatory inactivity, which means they cannot harvest shellfish during these times.

Another constraint for the *mariscadoras* is the requirement of supplementary income from other jobs. The income limits set for receiving cessation benefits are too low to guarantee a living wage, and the obligation to continue paying Social Security contributions further exacerbates the situation.

Although the European Maritime, Fisheries, and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) prioritizes “promoting sustainable fisheries and the recovery and conservation of aquatic biological resources,” it has not made much of a difference in improving the situation for *mariscadoras*. The Galician regional government did not publish the call for on-foot shellfish gathering aid until August 6, 2024, with eligibility criteria that were nearly impossible for most affected workers to meet. The *mariscadoras* were out of work for eight months by the time aid was announced, as the temporary suspension of activity in shellfish beds started in January 2024. Meanwhile, EMFAF aid for vessel-harvested shellfish was made available much earlier, in the first half of May.

The only direct financial support provided by the Galician government was a one-time payment of €550 (approximately USD 630) per shellfish harvesting permit (for both on-foot gatherers and vessel harvesters). This amount did not even cover the Social Security contributions that workers had to continue paying while waiting for their cessation benefit applications to be processed – a process that took approximately three months. The subsidy was viewed by many as an election-year tactic, as the payments were issued just three days before the Galician parliamentary elections.

Currently, most shellfish harvesters have resumed work, but under extremely precarious conditions. The reduction of their catch limits has directly impacted their earnings. In January, there was a significant drop in market prices. For example, cockles, which typically sold at auction for €3 per kg (approximately USD 3.45), were being sold at the same price as lower-value species such as periwinkles and limpets. *Mariscadoras* attributed this to the influx of shellfish from other regions that had been brought in to supply the markets during the cessation period, a trend that continued afterward.

The sector’s vulnerability remains a significant concern. *Mariscadoras* are well aware that if another mass mortality event like that of 2023 occurs, they will not meet the 120 days of activity required to qualify for European funding. Shellfish harvesting is no longer a reliable source of income, and the current social protection system does not

reflect the realities of people working in the industry. Many have abandoned the profession altogether, worsening the long-standing issue of generational renewal.

The decline in income has placed *cofradías* that depend on shellfish harvesting in a precarious financial situation, which could jeopardize the stability of workers. The cessation of activity resulted in a decrease in shellfish sales in 2024. Financial struggles

and management difficulties have led to growing tensions in *cofradías* assemblies and among groups of *mariscadoras*. The primary focus has now shifted to declining incomes and the deteriorating conditions of the *rias*, sidelining other long-standing demands from *mariscadoras* and pushing them even further from achieving equal representation in leadership and decision-making roles. ❖

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