

From Hidden to Heard: Closing Gender Gaps in the Fisheries

A summary of global evidence from the Illuminating Hidden Harvests study on women's contributions to small-scale fisheries and the urgent need for gender-inclusive policies

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Addressing gender inequalities, through improved data collection, equitable policies, and inclusive governance, can lead to more sustainable fisheries management, greater food security, poverty alleviation, and healthier ecosystems

Small-scale fisheries play a vital role in supporting livelihoods, food security, and sustainable development around the world, yet the significant contributions of women within this sector remain largely invisible. Yet, a significant portion of those who contribute to this sector - women - remain largely invisible in data, policies, and decision-making. The Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) study, a collaborative effort by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Duke University, and WorldFish, includes a dedicated chapter (Chapter 6: Towards Gender Inclusivity and Equality) that highlights the vital role of women in small-scale fisheries and underscores the urgent need to close persistent gender gaps.

Globally, it is estimated that 44.7 million women participate in small-scale fisheries value chains or subsistence activities, accounting for nearly 40 percent of those active in the sector. Women play essential roles across the fisheries value chain: they represent 15.4 percent of employment in pre-harvest activities such as gear fabrication and provisioning, 18.7 percent in harvesting activities - including both vessel-based and shore-based work - and nearly 50

percent limit women's access to resources, representation, and decision-making opportunities. The IHH study describes this as part of the broader "gender data gap," a phenomenon that reflects structural biases present not only in fisheries but across many labour sectors globally.

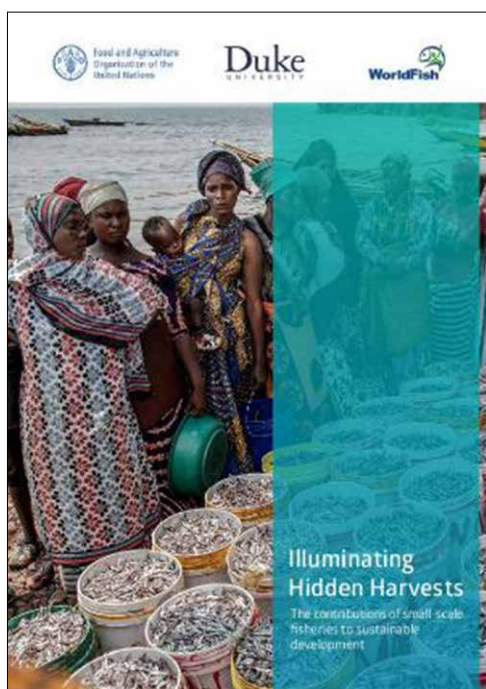
Women's participation is further constrained by barriers to accessing productive resources such as fishing grounds, equipment, and financing. Many women are concentrated in low-gear, intertidal, invertebrate fisheries. These sectors are often excluded from official definitions of fishing activities, resulting in underestimations of catch, economic value, and environmental impact. This limits not only women's livelihoods but also the broader understanding of small-scale fisheries' role in supporting coastal communities and ecosystems.

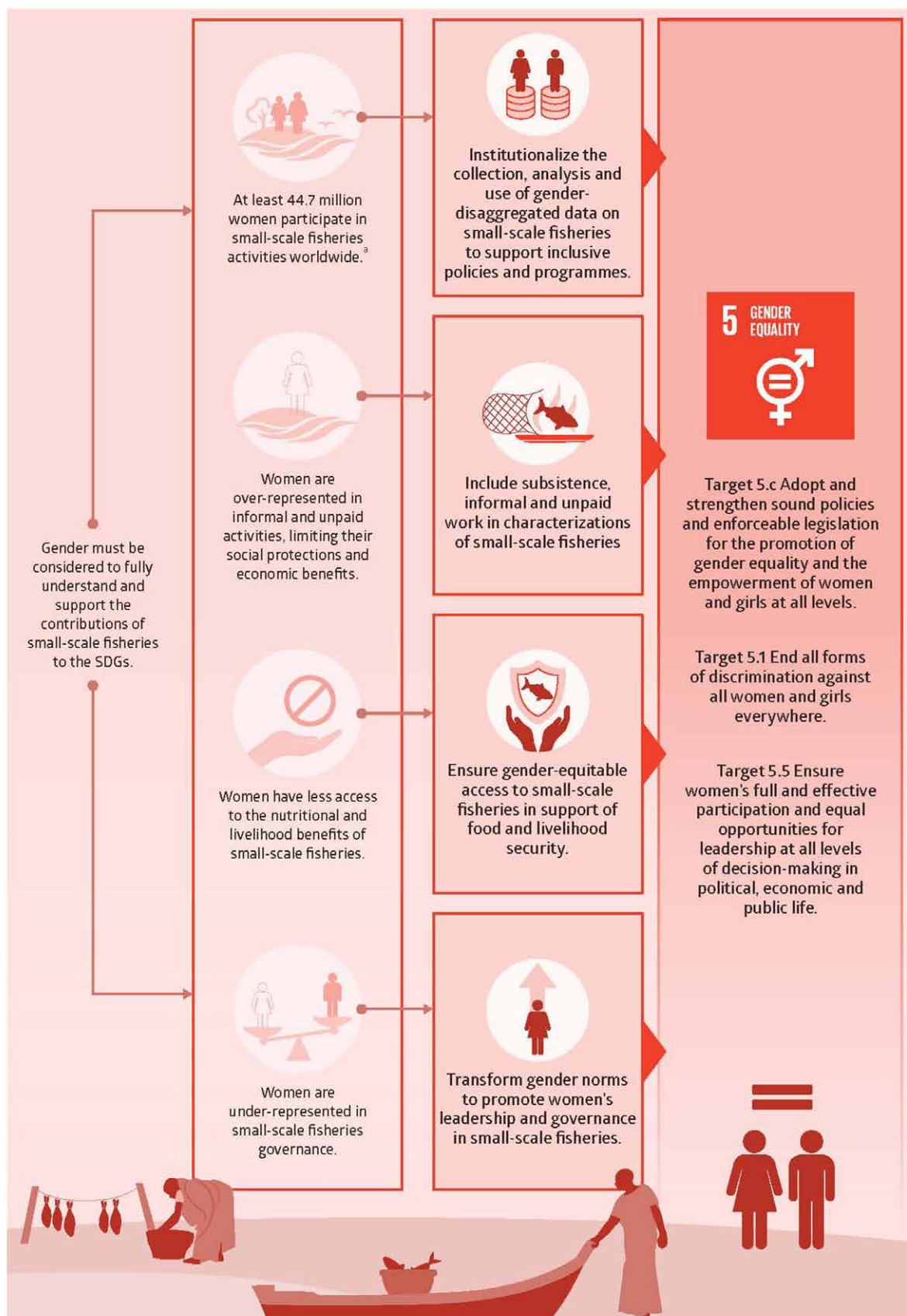
An interesting contribution of the IHH study is a conceptual figure that illustrates the pathways through which gender considerations enhance the contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development. It depicts how addressing gender inequalities, through improved data collection, equitable policies, and inclusive governance, can lead to more sustainable fisheries management, greater food security, poverty alleviation, and healthier ecosystems. It emphasises that gender equity is not simply a social issue but central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the objectives of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

The IHH study draws on extensive data, including 58 country case studies, employment datasets from 78 countries, and insights from global gender experts. These findings reveal both the extent of women's involvement and the critical gaps in data and governance that perpetuate their marginalization. Closing the gender data gap and ensuring women's voices are heard in fisheries governance are essential steps toward realising the full potential of small-scale fisheries as drivers of sustainable development.

percent in post-harvest activities like processing, transporting, trading, and selling. They also make up 45.2 percent of those engaged in subsistence fishing, a critical source of household nutrition and food security.

Despite these contributions, women's work often remains informal, unpaid, and largely excluded from official fisheries data collection. This exclusion feeds into a self-reinforcing cycle where gender-blind data produce gender-blind policies, which in turn





Key pathways through which gender considerations support the contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development.
Source: *Illuminating Hidden Harvests – The contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development* by FAO, Duke University & WorldFish, 2023

Without specific actions to collect gender-inclusive data and improve policy and implementation, the sector risks not only continuing to overlook women's contributions but also missing critical opportunities to build

resilient, equitable, and sustainable coastal communities worldwide. 🌊

Source: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/36825270-8c32-47c9-b383-56a53b4567f7/content>