

Illuminating gender in small-scale fisheries contributions to sustainable development

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Just over a decade ago the World Bank and collaborators published the Hidden Harvest report (World Bank 2012) that brought attention to many previously overlooked and undervalued aspects of fisheries, including estimates of women in the sector. This was the first attempt at quantifying the contributions by women to fisheries employment globally and brought attention to their importance in the sector – estimating that women represent one out of every two people employed in fisheries. This estimate was one of the most cited statistics from the Hidden Harvest report and brought much needed visibility to this marginalised group within an already marginalised sector – small-scale fisheries. However, despite bringing increased recognition to the important contributions by women in fisheries (and especially in small-scale fisheries, that are chronically underreported), a decade later, gender-inclusive and representative data remain elusive in many contexts, and policies and programmes to support fisheries and fishers remain gender blind. This impairs our ability to make advances towards gender equality and the empowerment of women in fisheries, and support sustainable fisheries and communities.

In March 2023, a follow-up report, the Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) study was published (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc4576en>). This multidisciplinary initiative led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Duke University and WorldFish, involved over 800 collaborators from around the world, including a team of over 28 gender advisors who informed this work. One of the goals of the gender dimension of the IHH study was to identify pathways through which gender considerations support the contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development.

Sarah and Danika were the initial leads on the gender dimension of this project, but we quickly realised that our expertise alone would not constitute a robust synthesis of insights on gender in small-scale fisheries. The Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section (GAFS) of the Asian



Fisheries Society was instrumental in our next step of leveraging our networks to bring together a team of gender advisors from around the world to share deep knowledge and rich insights from their work in supporting and advancing gender equity and equality in small-scale fisheries. Through a collaborative process, this large team of gender experts brought forward new insights on gender dimensions of small-scale fisheries while also identifying what continues to be hidden. This involved the sourcing and synthesis of existing data sources through country case studies and from labour force surveys, household income and expenditure surveys and country census data – the results of which are presented in this stand-alone chapter of the IHH report.

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Among the insights brought forward in this chapter is the persistent phenomenon of *sexist data*, whereby the vast majority of information gathered by fisheries management and related agencies and institutions refers only to men or activities done by men. This persists in part because of the focus on production/harvesting, excluding the full picture of actors and activities along value chain segments, subsistence fishing and processing, and all relevant inputs. Additionally, the focus on boat-based, gear-driven, income-earning, full-time fishing activities elevated in data collection and policy overlooks the contributions of women and other marginalised groups. The resulting data gap is further exacerbated by a lack of institutional capacity, low funding, no gender training for staff, and not enough women researchers. Ultimately, women, despite greater attention, are still not considered key players in fisheries and hence the collection, analysis and sharing of gender-inclusive and disaggregated data are not prioritised, including data on participating in fisheries governance institutions, despite commitments to gender inclusive participation and representation in small-scale fisheries. This phenomenon is highlighted by the IHH gender advisor for Uganda: “Women’s work is often excluded from fisheries data collected by the Department of Fisheries. This is particularly the case for processing, but also the other kinds of ‘shadow work’ that sustain fishermen” (J. L. Johnson, Gender Advisor, 2020). “Additionally, social and cultural norms can suppress women’s voices and hinder their active participation (A. Choudhury, 2019, Gender Advisor, Bangladesh), making it more difficult for them to have an influence on patriarchal systems” (S. Mangubhai, 2019, Gender Advisor, Fiji).

This absence of women in the data is, among other things, part of a self-reinforcing cycle of entrenched gender blindness that despite more widespread recognition of the importance of women in small-scale fisheries, hinders efforts to realise the sustainable development goals, especially SDG 5 (Gender equality) and SDG 14 (Healthy oceans). And thus, one of the key outputs of this chapter was not just coming up with new numbers but in reflecting on the process of doing so, and in trying to understand how we move from entrenched gender blindness to gender equity and inclusivity. We end the chapter by offering some key considerations for policy-makers, practitioners, academics and all those involved in small-scale fisheries as we navigate towards a more gender equitable future. We also identify in the chapter areas of further research, for example, a deeper exploration of what the challenges and opportunities are for closing the gender data gap in small-scale fisheries.

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