

# A first look at findings on gender and small-scale fisheries by the Illuminating Hidden Harvests project

Sarah Harper,<sup>1</sup> Danika Kleiber<sup>2</sup> and Nikita Gopal<sup>3</sup>

*The story of small-scale fisheries cannot be understood without considering gender, and to understand how important these fisheries are to our communities, it is necessary to be able to count how many people contribute to and benefit from them. To do this, we must step back and look at who is working along the entire small-scale fisheries value chain. We must also uncover who is making decisions about small-scale fisheries. The answer to these questions requires data. In gathering data to weave the story of small-scale fisheries, the Illuminating Hidden Harvest project confronts the persistent absence of women in the already meagre data available on small-scale fisheries. Here we provide a first look at the findings that have emerged from this effort, which include new data and insights on gender-differentiated contributions to and benefits from small-scale fisheries.*

The Illuminating Hidden Harvest (IHH) study, involving 800 collaborators around the world, is working to tell the story of small-scale fisheries<sup>4</sup>. By examining the economic, environmental, social, nutritional and governance dimensions of small-scale fisheries and their interlinkages, the IHH project aims to contribute to answering the big questions about small-scale fisheries! Gender is central to that story. Specifically, in relation to gender and small-scale fisheries, the IHH project wanted to know:

- What are the gendered labour patterns in pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest components of small-scale fisheries value chains? What types of labour are counted and what are missing from small-scale fisheries economic analyses? (**economic**)
- What species do women and men harvest, using what gear types, and in which habitats? Which are included, and which are missing from analyses? (**environmental**)
- How does gender intersect with other aspects of identity to determine access to nutrition and livelihood benefits

from small-scale fisheries? What are the current data limitations to understanding access to and benefits from small-scale, fisheries-related nutrition and livelihoods? (**social and nutritional**)

- How is gender addressed in small-scale fisheries governance in terms of representation, distribution of authority and mechanisms of accountability? What are the monitoring gaps to assess gender equity in governance? (**governance**)

To answer these questions, the IHH project brought together a team that included 28 country-specific gender advisors, and another 7 global gender experts that work in gender and small-scale fisheries issues across a range of contexts around the world. We, the three authors of this paper, are two of the global gender experts who co-led the gender theme of the IHH project, and the third is the gender advisor for India.

The IHH project's gender experts and advisors examined various data sources to identify the gender-disaggregated

<sup>1</sup> Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Victoria, Canada. Email: sjmharper@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Research Associate, WorldFish and James Cook University ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, Australia

<sup>3</sup> Principal Scientist, Indian Council of Agricultural Research-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Kochi, Kerala, India

<sup>4</sup> The IHH project, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Duke University and WorldFish, aims to generate and disseminate new evidence regarding the importance of small-scale fisheries to informing policy and practice, and will support implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Funding for the study is provided by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Oak Foundation and CGIAR Trust Fund.





data that exist. Through this process, we were able to identify gender biases and data gaps, and the barriers to understanding small-scale fisheries. Finally, wherever possible we used multiple knowledge and data sources to validate the estimates that were made using available data and estimation techniques so that we could get closer to a realistic picture of who contributes to and benefits from small-scale fisheries.

Looking specifically at the contributions to small-scale fisheries by women, and the benefits they derive from them, the analysis found that at least **45 million women** participate in small-scale fisheries value chains worldwide, representing 40% of all estimated small-scale fisheries labour. This estimate was based on household-based employment surveys for 78 countries around the world, involving a huge effort to uncover existing data sources. Nevertheless, this estimate likely still overlooks some of the more difficult to account for labour, such as that occurring in the home (e.g. informal processing) and along beaches (e.g. gleaning). The findings from this study also supported the notion that the participation of women in small-scale fisheries is concentrated within **informal and unpaid activities** along small-scale fisheries value chains, and that this, in many cases, limits their social protections and security. Data representing these contributions continue to be systematically excluded from official fisheries data collection and analyses, and thus excluded from fisheries decision-making.

We then examined how women's fishing activities were accounted for. The short answer is: not often. Fishing policy priorities and the data collection to support them tends to elevate boat-based, gear-driven, income-earning, full-time, and finfish fishing. However, women's fishing is often found to be foot-based, low-gear, subsistence, part-time, and invertebrate focused. The differences in fishing by gender reflect cultural and social barriers that often limit women's access to resources and the time needed for boat fishing. Only 30% of the 58 country-case studies included in the

IHH project were able to provide data on fisheries conducted on foot – where women tend to be more concentrated – although 64% of those countries we examined are known to have fisheries that are conducted on foot.

Women, and especially certain groups of women, have less access to, but stand to disproportionately benefit from, access to small-scale fisheries, with broad societal implications for food and nutrition security, and poverty alleviation.

Women's participation in small-scale fisheries decision-making is often limited, both in total numbers (where data are available), and in positions of power. Fisheries organisations that have strong female representation are often focused on the post-harvest sector, where women are most represented.

The full IHH report is due to be released in 2022 and will include strong recommendations on how to move beyond sexist data structures that mischaracterise the contributions to and benefits from small-scale fisheries, especially those that women are involved in, and that reinforce a cycle of gender-blind policies and inequitable outcomes. Overcoming these obstacles and advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women in small-scale fisheries requires actions at all levels – from on-the-ground practitioners to research institutions, as well as those influencing, making and implementing policies.

### Further reading

FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). 2021. Illuminating Hidden Harvests: The contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development. Project website: <https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/ihh/en/>

Harper S. and Kleiber D.L. 2019. Illuminating gender dimensions of hidden harvests. SPC Women in Fisheries Bulletin 30:53–55. <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/6bvgz>



Figure 1. Women wait for their turn to collect the fish catch.  
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