

Content developed in collaboration with the initiative [SAGE \(Seafood and Gender Equality\)](#) and FishWise

Women in Seafood

“When women thrive all of society benefits and succeeding generations are given a better start in life.” – Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Learn about:

- [Gender and work](#)
- [Global challenges and gender](#)
- [Addressing the imbalance](#)

Women are present in all segments of the seafood industry, from harvest to retail to administration. However, gender barriers keep women from full and equitable participation, which is imperative to the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goal 5](#), gender equality. The International Organization for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) conducted a [seafood industry survey](#) to analyse the gender composition of the world’s top 100 seafood companies. In 2020, women at top positions (executives and board) grew to 14%, the highest ever recorded. However, there are still abundant examples of women being excluded entirely. The survey also found that over one third of the seafood companies analyzed had corporate bodies exclusively composed of men.

Based on data collected by [FAO Globefish](#), we see that women play a major role in the seafood industry.

Globally, 50% of seafood workers are women.	Women make up 70% of the global aquaculture workforce.	90% of workers in post-harvest and seafood processing roles are women.
--	---	---

The survey conducted by WSI is one of the few gender composition surveys informing the seafood industry. Qualitative and quantitative data on the role of women in seafood is incomplete and limited. While conducting desktop research on the state of women in seafood, the FAO found that sex disaggregated data was severely lacking in most countries. Without the sex disaggregated data, it’s difficult to determine women’s participation in and women’s impact on, as well as the power and wealth distribution in, the seafood industry.

Recent studies also called attention to the [need for the protection of women’s rights in seafood value chains](#), particularly as women often engage in onshore harvesting or post-harvest activities that may not be covered by existing social standards or schemes.

“...the data is far from sufficient for policy makers to design gender equitable fisheries and aquaculture policies” – FAO Globefish: [The role of women in the seafood industry](#)

Collecting and analyzing the proper data is of vital importance to the goal of creating an equitable seafood industry. Building gender equitable policy and practice is further imperative to the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goal 5](#), gender equality.

Gender and work

Although data on gender in the seafood industry is limited, findings from other sectors show challenges for women at work.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Any unwelcome behavior or action that is explicit or sexual in nature is considered sexual harassment. It is important to emphasize and understand that sexual harassment is defined based on *impact*, not *intent*. Sexual and gender based harassment may look like lewd comments, unwanted sexual advances, sexual coercion, derogatory and sexist language or remarks, and sexist and offensive behaviors.

It is difficult to measure the prevalence of sexual harassment in workplaces because it often goes unreported. The power dynamics within a workplace make it difficult for women to officially report sexual harassment to supervisors and seniors who are often male. Women may also fear retaliation, job loss or demotion, disbelief, inaction, or receipt of blame. It's estimated that over 70% of sexual harassment incidences go unreported.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's [Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace](#) found that anywhere from 25%-85% of women in the workplace experienced sexual harassment. The divergence in these data can largely be attributed to whether or not the women labeled the unwanted experiences as sexual harassment, regardless of the negative impact it may have had on them. The Task Force found that when women were given surveys with more definitive examples of what harassment looks like, the number of women who reported being sexually harassed increased.

The lack of accurate reporting highlights a key gap in workplace surveys, as well as a lack of a safe reporting environment. Businesses may provide toolkits and training such as the [Sexual Harassment toolkit](#), created by the Equal Rights Advocates, to help their employers recognize and report sexual harassment in the workplace. While businesses should work to prevent workplace harassment because it is the moral thing to do, the legal and financial benefits to stopping sexual harassment such as higher employee moral and productivity are also impactful.

More than a Wage Gap

Women do not benefit equitably in the same work and sectors as men do. Women typically get paid less for the same positions men hold, work in lower paying industry sectors, hold less supervisory and

managerial roles, and receive fewer returns in entrepreneurial ventures. While the [gender pay gap](#) may focus on the economic difference between working men and women, there are a combination of intersectional and systemic factors impeding women beyond the monetary ones.

Unpaid Work: Women are often engaged in unpaid and unofficial work such as net mending, bookkeeping, collecting bait, and cooking for fishers and family. They are also often the caretaker for children and elders, and in charge of household management and upkeep. [UN Women](#) estimates that women do as much as two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men. The time burden of unpaid work means women have less time to seek out paying jobs or must work twice as long holding both unofficial and official roles.

Lower-return work: Women in fisheries and other industries more frequently hold less-profitable positions, such as in post-harvest and processing roles. The time burden of unpaid household and childcare work make it difficult for women to spend long periods of time away from home, making jobs like shrimp peeling or [fish retail](#) more accessible than fishing. In addition, gender discrimination and cultural barriers may also create barriers for women to enter into higher paying roles.

Limited access to resources: Access to land, ponds, coastline, capital, technology, skills, and services are all essential to establishing and maintaining livelihoods. However, women traditionally have less ability to access these resources (whether because of sexism in policy or lack of financial capital). Without the ability to purchase land, a right denied to women in many countries, women cannot start or run their own land-based seafood business. In conjunction, without property rights, it's difficult for women to establish credit, making it near impossible to access insurance or loans. [WorldFish](#) and the [FAO](#) both point to women's lack of access to these assets and resources as a barrier to equity in fisheries and other industries. Household decision making also plays a role in a woman's right to resources. Even if a woman has credit or access to credit, the male of the household may ultimately determine how credit and savings are spent. Access to resources is also limited by a lack of training for women in industry practices and new technologies. The lack of development projects for women may be attributed to both cultural and social exclusion from the industry and the lack of data surrounding women's contributions. Without a realistic image of women's contributions, it is difficult to create development projects that will support and uplift women in the industry.

Lack of inclusion in decision making: Women are rarely in positions of political or community power. They are not usually included in decision making or codesigning discussions that affect their ability to earn a living. They are also often precluded from industry and professional associations that would allow them to advocate for their rights.

Limited mobility: Impediments to women's mobility may arise out of time constraints and burdens associated with child, elderly, and home care duties. It may also arise from lack of access or cultural barriers to using cars, bikes, and other forms of transportation. This leaves women without the ability to travel far from their homes or with higher time burdens should they choose to travel. Limited mobility may leave women with less time to do paid work or an inability to access markets or places of work.

Global challenges and gender

Women are often further marginalized during times of crisis or global change. Additionally, overfishing and habitat destruction, climate disruption, and pandemics like COVID-19 all affect women disproportionately relative to men.

Overfishing

When fishing grounds and marine habitats become over-exploited, fishers must adopt new practices such as fishing further from the coast or using new fishing technology. However, women often cannot access the resources necessary to adapt. Limited capital bars women from purchasing new equipment like new engine components or ice boxes to preserve quality. The time burden of being a woman caretaker also prevents women from travelling further to unexploited marine sites.

Climate disruption

[Women are more vulnerable](#) to climate disruption than men are. Women in rural areas depend on local natural resources for livelihoods and for the security of their families. During extreme weather phenomena, such as those brought about by climate disruption, women must work harder to secure resources like firewood and water for their households, increasing their time burdens. Climate disruption in marine habitats may mean reduced productivity from reefs, sea level rise, and more destructive coastal storms. Men may be able to more adequately recover from the effects of climate disruption on marine ecosystems due to their access to capital and their ability to travel further seaward to fish, whereas women are more likely to suffer the consequences, including from the increased gender-based violence that occurs during times of crisis like displacement.

COVID-19

Women hold a majority of processing and post-harvest roles in fisheries and aquaculture. These occupations in processing plants and retail markets have been shown to have higher exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Men in seafood have had more opportunities to work from home, limiting their exposure, because their more executive roles allow for it. Seafood processing companies have been forced to reduce their capacity, laying off line and floor workers, who are disproportionately women.

It is still difficult to determine who will be most affected across the seafood industry. WSI states that [effective responses to COVID-19](#) and future policies must be informed by sex disaggregated data and that women must be included in decision making processes around the pandemic.

Addressing the imbalance

To achieve gender equality, businesses, organizations, and governments must focus on gender equity and closing the gender gap in seafood.

Gender-transformative change

The gender gap is underlaid by gender norms and power relations; without addressing these systemic issues, companies, organizations, and governments cannot effectively promote gender equity and equality. To approach the gender gap from a gender-transformative lens is to approach gender inequality with the intent of transforming the power dynamics and systems that uphold and reinforce these inequalities.

“...a gender-transformative approach to development goes beyond the ‘symptoms’ of gender inequality to address ‘the social norms, attitudes, behaviors, and social systems that underlie them.’” – [CARE USA: Measuring gender-transformative change](#).

Business Actions for Gender-transformative Change

To engage in gender-transformative work, companies must focus on the collective responsibility to uplift and support women, rather than the woman’s individual responsibility to be a catalyst for her own change.

Sex disaggregated data: When collecting data on employees, policy, and company actions, data must be sex disaggregated. [Sex disaggregated data](#) will show a more complete picture of the complexities and realities of seafood industry bias. This may help businesses develop more inclusive policy and work to create equitable opportunities for women in the industry.

Looking across the supply chain: Companies must account for women across all portions of their supply chains. Informal work done by women that contributes to their seafood supply chain should be included in a company surveys and audits to better inform decision making and policy.

Internal company analysis: Companies should look inward to identify how they may be upholding gender inequalities or impeding women’s empowerment. Examining the internal practices, attitudes, and beliefs of staff and partners allows companies to identify their own roles as power holders. Companies should also assess the gender breakdown of company leadership and the inclusion of women in decision making.

Internal training: Training on signs and examples of sexual harassment are crucial in both recognition and prevention of the issue. Supervisory roles should have additional training on how to approach cases of sexual harassment and how to create safe and respectful environments for people who have experienced harassment to come forward.

Advocacy and partnership: Partnering and collaborating with organizations that specialize in gender-transformative change will help companies drive their own progress as well as promote gender equity and equality across the seafood supply chain. Organizations like [SAGE](#) and [Minorities in Aquaculture](#) work to create a more inclusive seafood industry. Supporting collaborative projects and tools, like OxFam and the Asian Seafood Improvement Collaborative’s [ASIC Social and Gender Standards](#) tool, may inspire other organizations and businesses to evaluate their own gender impacts.