

# WOMEN: THE UNSEEN BACKBONE OF THE SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

by Marie Christine Monfort



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*The Food and Agriculture Organisation's GLOBEFISH Research Programme had commissioned the author to explore and shed light on a rather unknown aspect of the seafood industry: the participation of women. This worldwide desktop study, the first of its kind, presents what is known, and what remains to be investigated in this crucial component of the seafood industry*

## Wide knowledge gap

GLOBEFISH Research Programme Volume 119, published in May 2015, is entitled: "The role of women in the seafood industry". This groundbreaking report provided evidence that women represent some 50% of the total workforce. Yet, they are far more present at the lower levels of the industry and dramatically absent from the upper levels of the industry and its associated services.

Knowledge and understanding of the very complex distribution of roles, power, access to resources and profits between men and women was found to be incomplete, varying greatly between regions and industry sectors. On a global scale, quantitative and qualitative data on the



participation of women is sparse and when it exists, it may be of poor quality and only cover some segments of the industry.

The report examines in six countries (Republic of Croatia, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the French Republic, the Republic of Iceland, the Republic of India and the Republic of Senegal) the level of information and knowledge describing the role of women in the seafood industry, but often the data did not precisely deal with the situation of women. What is known, documented? Does sex disaggregated data over the full employment spectrum in the seafood industry, and sociological, anthropological and economical studies on the role and power distribution between the sexes exist?

The study shows that developing countries such as India and Senegal, for instance, offer rather good records because these important fishing and aquaculture nations have received the attention of gender-sensitive development aid agencies. By contrast, knowledge on the participation of women in the seafood industry in France is dramatically poor.

It must be stressed that Asia is outstanding by the number and quality of gender-focused research and projects promoted by regional institutions and organisations, including Worldfish Centre and the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia (NACA).

## Where are the women?

The level of participation of women varies greatly by segment, as depicted in Tables 1 & 2.

Table 1: The participation of women in fishing and post-harvest operations

	Small-scale		Large-scale		Total
	Marine	Inland	Marine	Inland	
Total workforce	52	56	9	2	119
Percentage women	36%	54%	64%	28%	47%
Developing countries	50	56	9	1.5	116.5
Percentage women	36%	55%	66%	26%	47%
Developed countries	2	Very few	1	Very few	3
Percentage women	43%	44%	38%	Na	41%

Source: World Bank, 2012

Table 2: Concentration of women in the seafood industry, by sector

	No/low	Medium	High
Industrial fishing (high capital intensive)	X		
Industrial aquaculture (high capital intensive)	X		
Professional organisations	X		
Fisheries management	X		
Leadership level	X		
Small scale fishing (low capital intensive)		X	
Fisheries support activities (ashore)		X	
Ex-vessel selling and marketing		X	
Administration		X	
Quality inspection		X	
Researchers, marine and social sciences		X	
Source of knowledge other than scientific		X	
Collection of on-shore aquatic items			X
Small scale aquaculture (low capital intensive)			X
Seafood processing			X
Environment activists			X
Seafood purchasers for households			X

We see that women are rarely seen in industrial fishing, in professional organisations, and at leadership levels; however they are mainly in artisanal aquaculture, on-shore fishing, and in seafood processing at workers' level. They are also active in environment NGOs. What shapes this particular social distribution of roles between men and women?

## Patriarchy rules

Where information is available, in both developing and developed countries there is evidence that women's participation is constrained or affected by strong cultural rules, robust societal conventions and even in some cases, by discriminatory laws. The seafood industry in both developed and developing countries is ruled by a patriarchy paradigm, where hierarchy, authority, power, competition, development, control of human and natural resources and domination of others is shaped mainly by males. The conditions for participation of both genders in the industry and related services are organised according to these rules at all levels from workers to decision makers. In this environment, the voices of men are valued more than the voices of women.

In all countries, time devoted to child and elderly people care, and to domestic tasks, such as tidying up the house, collecting, buying and preparing food is perceived as a natural duty that falls on women's shoulders. These responsibilities add, depending on the country and the position of the women,

one to four hours onto their working days, compared to their male counterparts. This creates a double negative impact on women's participation in the business. The time devoted to these tasks is not spent on productive work (from an industry viewpoint), and the money spent on food, care and education cannot be saved to be spent in productive inputs.

**Table 3:** Constraints and obstacles to women's participation in the seafood industry

<b>Societal</b>	
<b>Constraints/obstacles</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Male dominant society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited access to influential networks</li> <li>Lower chances to occupy intermediate and leading positions</li> </ul>
Time spent on family caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less time for all other productive activities</li> <li>Less time for making money</li> <li>Less time for upgrading knowledge, participating in training courses</li> <li>Unpaid undeclared support to the family business</li> </ul>
<b>Specific to the industry</b>	
<b>Constraints/obstacles</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Barred from certain activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not allowed to go at sea</li> <li>Glass ceiling effect: hindered from accessing top positions</li> </ul>
No ownership rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less possibility to run own business</li> <li>Less possibility to access finances, insurance, services</li> </ul>
Prejudices against women limit their access to capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited access to credit, financial services</li> <li>More stringent rules to borrow compared to men</li> <li>Hinders investing in modern technology for fishing, farming, processing</li> </ul>
Policy makers' gender blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low visibility of women</li> <li>Disadvantageous policies or less access to support policies</li> <li>Non-women friendly support programmes (training, etc.)</li> </ul>
Lack of women's organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low lobbying power</li> <li>Low representation at decision making levels</li> </ul>

## Lower wages or no remuneration

Like many other sectors, the pay gap between men and women occupying equivalent positions applies also to the seafood industry. A study conducted for the United States Agency for International Development on the shrimp value chain in Bangladesh ("A pro-poor analysis of the shrimp sector in Bangladesh", cited 21 May 2012) exemplifies these differences in earnings (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Relative earnings of women compared with their male counterparts

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percentage less</b>
Catching, sorting fry	64
Repairing ponds, undertaking casual agricultural labour	82
Processing plants – packing section	72
Processing plants – cooking/breeding section	60

Source: FAO, 2012

The participation of women in fisheries and aquaculture activities as non-declared, non-paid support personnel to family businesses is common worldwide.

## Negative global forces

Conditions may be improving in some areas of the world but in many others, signs of deterioration due to global changes have been detected by social researchers. Research carried out on this topic indicates that women in coastal areas depending on seafood as a source of revenue or a source of food are particularly affected by these changes. Globalisation and its hunger for cheap inputs including labour, the widespread decline in marine resources, the deterioration of marine coastal habitats and climate changes, among other events, generate severe consequences for fragile populations, amongst which women are numerous.

## In summary

For some thirty years now, researchers and development experts have produced evidence of the crucial role of women in fisheries, and the gender specific constraints they face, but this knowledge has hardly ever been disseminated among seafood professionals. Research has been carried out, reports have been published, and debates have been organised on the issue of discrimination against women, but in the seafood industry the level of awareness about the role played by women is still very limited among seafood stakeholders.

And so we come back to the primary aim of GLOBEFISH Research Programme Volume 119, which is to increase awareness amongst business leaders and policy makers, and to enhance their knowledge and sensitisation about the value women bring to the seafood industry. It also encourages them to consider each time they develop a new project or a policy, the question: 'have we overlooked women?'

The author wishes to raise awareness on the 6th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture & Fisheries (GAF6) which will be organised as a Special Symposium at the 11th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum that will take place in Bangkok, Thailand in August 2016. There will be a Panel session # 3, where industry leaders and gender specialists will share their thoughts about current developments and the way forward. For more information: <http://genderaquafish.org/2016-gaf6-august-bangkok-thailand/>

**Reader enquiry number 9**



**Marie Christine Monfort**, an economist and seafood marketing expert, was commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organisation's GLOBEFISH Programme to conduct a study on the participation of women in the seafood industry. A copy of the FAO report is available at: <http://www.globefish.org/vol-119-the-role-of-women-in-the-seafood-industry.html>