

A global review of women's experiences in governing small-scale fisheries

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This article shares the key findings of a global review on women's experiences in shaping and influencing small-scale fisheries governance. The open access, full-text article on this review was recently published in Fish and Fisheries (<https://doi.org/10.1111/faf.12672>).

An estimated 45 million women make up 40% of the workforce in small-scale capture fisheries (SSF) worldwide (Harper et al. 2022). However, their representative voices concerning challenges, interests and priorities tend to be left out of SSF decision-making spaces (Bennett 2005; Gissi et al. 2018; Kleiber et al. 2017) little attention has paid to the role of gender in the development process and, more specifically, the work done by women in the overall management of fisheries. Lack of attention to the gender dimension of fisheries management can result in policy interventions missing their target of creating sustainable livelihoods at the community level. There is little doubt that fishing-dependent communities have a vital role to play in the overall development process of many coastal West African States, but without a complete understanding of the complexity of gender roles, the goal of sustainable livelihoods is unlikely to be achieved. In a bid to

improve knowledge about gender roles in fishing communities, and to provide policy makers with some guidance as to where interventions might be most useful, a workshop was held in Cotonou, Benin (West Africa, while undermining their contributions and perpetuating gender inequity. Women are empowered when treated equitably, their local economies grow, and fisheries resources become more sustainable (Barclay et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2021).

We have a limited scholarly understanding about how to meaningfully engage women in SSF governance despite decades of studies that have focused on gendered dimensions of SSF (Frangoudes et al. 2020; Kleiber et al. 2017). To this end, a comprehensive synthesis on the state of current empirical evidence on women's engagement in SSF governance has remained a critical gap in applied scholarship and practice. To



Figure 1. Geographical locations of case studies.

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address this gap, we conducted a systematic scoping review of peer-reviewed empirical literature. Our review was guided by three research questions:

1. What is the scope of empirical literature on how women participate, influence and shape SSF governance?
2. What specific roles do women perform in SSF governance processes?
3. How do women shape and influence governance outcomes, and what barriers do they face in doing so?

We identified, characterised and assessed the evidence base at the intersection of gender and SSF governance. This included 54 empirical case studies of how women have managed to shape and influence decision-making, rules and collective action across the globe (Fig. 1).

Our results confirmed the crucial need to embed gender in the empirical examination of SSF governance, and to deliberately expand the current evidence base on this topic (see also Frangoudes et al. 2020; Gopal et al. 2020; Kleiber et al. 2017; Weeratunge et al. 2010; Williams 2019)

The findings also revealed that the institutional contexts within which women participate encompass a broad spectrum of arrangements (e.g. rules and regulations, and participatory arrangements such as co-management, social norms, customary practices, and relational spaces).

We also identified a typology of governance tasks performed by women in SSF. This typology included leadership roles and active participation in decision-making; relational networking and collective action; exercising agency and legitimacy; resource monitoring; knowledge sharing; meeting attendance (with no/less participation in decision-making); and activism and mass mobilisation.

The review also synthesised the governance outcomes achieved by women. These outcomes, for example, included improved socioeconomic contributions, gaining recognition for their previously “invisible” roles, and claiming user rights (See Freitas et al. 2020; Gallardo-Fernández and Saunders 2018; Gustavsson et al. 2021).

Women, however, face substantial barriers to their effective participation, such as gendered power hierarchies, gender-restrictive norms, household obligations, and lack of access to and control over resources (Baker-Médard 2017; Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). Our findings related to these barriers resonated with our current understanding about the root causes of gender inequity within SSF contexts (See Fabinyi and Barclay 2022; Kleiber et al. 2017; Koralagama et al. 2017; Lawless et al. 2019).

Furthermore, we drew broader insights based on the patterns that emerged across the literature. We found that women’s governance roles and contributions are closely linked with

how gender was treated as a key topic of discussion within decision-making processes. Gender was largely excluded as a topic of discussion in contexts where women only participate in day-to-day operational tasks such as resource monitoring (see de la Torre-Castro 2019; Kleiber et al. 2018). In contrast, our findings revealed that women’s participation in problem solving demonstrated their agency and legitimacy in influencing decision-making (see Gallardo-Fernández and Saunders 2018; Harper et al. 2018).

Our review also highlighted the practical implications of improving women’s meaningful participation in SSF governance. For example, it is crucial to explore the breadth of governance arrangements to include informal spaces where women are already active (e.g. social events, religious ceremonies, self-help groups). This way, the focus of efforts to improve women’s participation can deliberately extend beyond formal and semi-formal arrangements (e.g. quotas, rights, co-management), which often tend to get attention. Another implication was the need to build flexibility into governance arrangements in order to continuously adjust in response to current and emerging changes broadly within SSF, such as the aging fisher populations and re-organisation of fishing activities from communal to household enterprises.

While the synthesis was not intended to evaluate the level of success of the governance interventions reported in the literature, we drew insights about the kinds of outcomes needed to meaningfully advance gender equality. For example, the cases where deeply gendered practices and power relations were challenged were of particular importance to the critical examination of gendered governance outcomes (e.g. Gallardo-Fernández and Saunders 2018). Another highlighted implication was how women’s efforts link with societal values in ways that may help legitimise their representation in SSF governance (Freitas et al. 2020; Harper et al. 2018; Ko et al. 2010). The findings here revealed the importance of paying attention to the role of men in recognising and facilitating women’s efforts, starting with the openness to involve women in discussions where they were previously excluded.

Learning from these experiences is crucial to identifying the entry points to efforts that seek to meaningfully engage women in fisheries management, improve conservation and stewardship, and foster gender-equitable outcomes.

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