

Why use a gender lens to analyse the impacts of COVID-19 on the seafood industry?

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Why do we need a gender lens to deal with the risks and impacts from COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture? Because at this point of the pandemic, although we cannot fully depict what the consequences will be on either gender, we can assume that the coronavirus outbreak will hit women harder than men, threaten progress made in empowering women, and deepen gender inequities already pervasive in fisheries. The International Organisation for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) will watch how the contagion of the economic downturn hits both women and men in fisheries, aquaculture and the entire seafood value chain, and will examine more closely the situation that women encounter.

Global crisis

COVID-19 has spread to countries all over the world, and national responses vary greatly according to each country's healthcare system, its capacities, quality of care and accessibility to health care. One universal feature is that women are on the frontline of the battle against the virus in every country. With very few exceptions, women represent a vast majority (70%) of the healthcare workforce, bear a great part of the responsibility for the care and education of children when schools have closed, and keep the family safe during this very uncertain time. We must not, however, forget that women in the food industry, particularly in seafood, have a key role in ensuring food security for all.

The seafood industry's gender division of labour

Women make up a significant part of the fisheries workforce, representing half of the entire world labour force in this

sector. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that women comprise 15% of the harvesting workforce: 70% in aquaculture and 80–90% in seafood processing. They also represent 60% of all seafood traders and retailers in Africa and Asia. Clearly, women are fundamental agents in the organisation and functioning of local, regional and global flows of seafood.

Furthermore, men and women occupy distinct roles in the seafood value chain. Chief executive officers, board members and fishermen are nearly always men, whereas employees in processing plants are nearly always women. The seafood industry shows a strong gendered vertical division of labour whereby a majority of *ignored, invisible and unrecognised* (IIU) women occupy low-revenue jobs and where top jobs are occupied mostly by men. In that regard, the coronavirus will affect gender roles differently and women and men will be affected by the pandemic unequally.



Where are women in the seafood industry? Source: WSI

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Kelp farming in Canada. © Saltsisters Canada



Women in a tuna factory in Ecuador. © FAO

Identifying the positions that most women occupy can shed light on the impacts that this crisis will have on them. Women working in lower-paid positions may have to continue working in order to earn an income, whereas women in higher-paid positions may be able to work from home. In addition, employees working in processing plants and retail markets – which are mainly women – are at greater risk of exposure to the virus.

One emergency response given by some companies is to protect their frontline employees who process seafood by ensuring decent and safe working environments with proper protective equipment. This requires changes in work routines, such as purchasing protective equipment and clothing, and not all companies will comply with these strict recommendations.

Coronavirus and the economic crash

During the pandemic, labour markets, including those in the seafood sector, will be deeply affected. Job losses are estimated to be in the tens of millions according to the International Labour Organization.² The loss of business revenue will inexorably result in laying off workers, starting with temporary and casual ones, which are disproportionately women. This is already happening in the Chilean salmon industry, which is reducing the production capacity of plants by almost half, and layoffs are already taking place among precarious workers. Seafood businesses and fishing communities have become reliant on seafood imports from China. The consequent rise in prices induces a severe disruption of local markets.³

The widespread work-from-home movement will enable millions of workers to keep their jobs and their salaries, partly or fully, but this arrangement is largely available to white-collar workers. In the seafood industry, those office workers protected by full-time work contracts are mainly men. Women in low-paying jobs with insecure employment conditions are at greater risk of losing their income. When women lose their income, the budgets supporting the well-being of their children, households and communities (housing, food, healthcare or childcare) are negatively affected.

Disruption along the seafood value chain

Who will be the most affected link in the chain when the seafood value chain is disrupted? How will the decrease in fish landings and subsequent fast-rising prices such as already observed in West Africa affect male fishermen, female processors, female retailers and entire communities? How will stopping the movement of seafood impact the different categories of players? The exhaustion of marine resources across the globe has had dramatic impacts on women (who tend to do most of the processing and trading of seafood products), and it is likely that there will be similar disproportionate and discriminatory effects due to COVID-19.

In order to answer these questions and to put forward smart and resilient responses, we need sex-disaggregated data in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Efforts in this direction must also include surveillance and monitoring of the pandemic.

Effective responses need to be backed by quality data and evidence-based solutions, and women must be a part of the decision-making process. As far as WSI is concerned, it will set up a data collection programme and organise a “watch” on the local and regional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Very probable prospects in a highly uncertain future

Achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be critically hampered by the economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis. There is a possibility that when resources are needed to combat the pandemic, the ability of countries to spend money on other development priorities, such as combating climate change or gender inequality, will be severely constrained. There is a risk that during the upcoming period of high economic turbulences, leaders will think that gender equality (SDG 5) is not a priority, and that it can wait until the economy is in better shape. This would amount to repeating a mistake. In overlooking the gender dimension within the seafood industry, policy-makers have made an incorrect diagnosis regarding marine resources and economic management. Consequently, their suggestion to achieve SDG 14 – Life below water – will miss the target. What is needed first and foremost is awareness of the fact that SDG 14 will not be attained if 50% of the population it affects is not taken into consideration. Gender must be embedded in all elements and targets of an SDG 14 policy.

When we are ready to get back on our feet and get the blue economy going again – hopefully a truly sustainable version of the blue economy – decision-makers will need to consider the organisation of the industry with regards to gender. We predict that responses will fail and increase the inequalities between women and men. Research from other types of health crises has shown that leaving gender inequalities out of the crisis response has further compounded those inequalities. WSI considers that if we want to find the most effective ways to deal with COVID-19, all workers, including women, need to be listened to and included in building future responses.

About WSI

WSI aspires to a seafood industry that is free of gender inequalities, free of sexism and gender-based discriminations, and where men and women enjoy equal opportunities to build a truly sustainable industry where the environmental, economic and social dimensions are equally taken into account. Through its actions WSI has already contributed to increasing the attention paid by stakeholders to this topic.

WSI's mission is to include public and private seafood stakeholders in several projects to create the conditions for adopting gender sensitive practices and tools. WSI takes a three-layered approach: raising awareness, advocating for a better understanding, and inspiring practical changes.

² https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_749398/lang--en/index.htm

³ <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/fisheries-aquaculture-and-covid-19-issues-and-policy-responses-a2aa15de/>