

Recognising the role of women in fisheries: A priority for fisheries sustainability in the 21st century

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The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2018 expresses it clearly: women are part of the fishing sector but invisible in statistics. Indeed, over 59.6 million people are engaged in fisheries and aquaculture worldwide, with women making up 14% of the workforce in the primary sector, and almost 50% when pre-harvesting, post-harvesting and marketing sectors are included in statistics (FAO 2018). The inclusion of women in statistics and the collection of sex- and age-disaggregated data is a major challenge but the first step in breaking the cycle of invisibility of women in fisheries and aquaculture. While this starts by counting women, we cannot limit ourselves or wait for quantitative data to acknowledge the real position of women in the sector, their access to decision-making and their power (Monfort 2015). A clear need exists to recognise the role of women if we want to achieve sustainable fisheries.

This invisibility of women does not only concern the workplace, but also their role in the household and within the community. Women are often assigned the most unstable roles, poorly paid or unpaid positions, and are under-recognised (or not recognised at all); in addition, their unpaid care and domestic work in the household are not acknowledged (FAO 2013).

This triple work and time burden (Grassi et al. 2015) is a consequence of the perception of the role and tasks that women “should perform”. These perceptions, built by the

norms, laws, traditions and culture of a specific social-geographical context, shape the distribution of roles but also women’s access to assets, resources, technologies, information, loans and fundamental rights. This impacts their ability to participate in decision-making, for themselves and their families, and their access to leadership. This prevents them from building a viable and enduring future in fisheries and aquaculture. However, the future of the fisheries sector depends on its ability to be sustainable, and women are major actors in this shift. The time has come to recognise women as agents of change and give them the space and opportunity to realise themselves as such.

The International Symposium on Fisheries Sustainability: Strengthening the Science-Policy Nexus, held in Rome from the 18 to 21 November 2019, sent a clear message of the importance of recognising the role of women in fisheries and implementing a gender lens to achieve fisheries sustainability in the 21st century. These concepts resonated strongly as the event gathered nearly 1000 participants from the fisheries sector, academia, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, development agencies, other United Nations agencies and the private sector. Gathering a well-balanced set of participants, across organisation type, geography and gender, was a priority for the FAO in the organisation of the symposium, as highlighted in Figure 1 with the comparison of speakers by gender in conferences related to

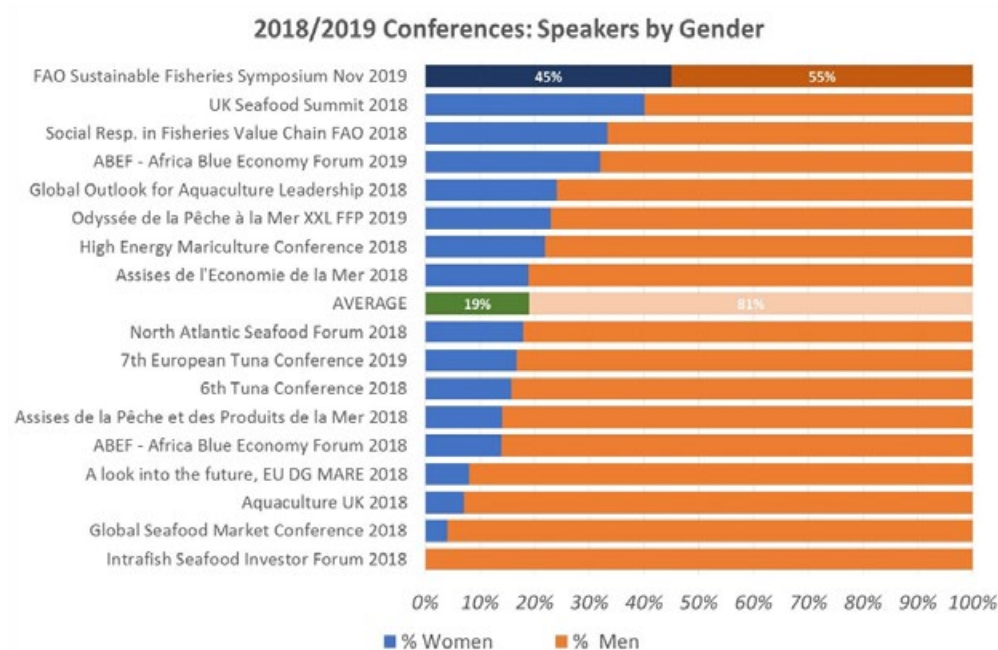


Figure 1. Speakers by gender in conferences related to fisheries and aquaculture in 2018/2019. (Source: @SeafoodWomen, 6 November 2019, “FAO Sustainable Fisheries Symposium offers an almost PERFECT GENDER balance (45% W-55% M). What a contrast with other fish/seafood conferences. Thks @FAOfish @Manu_FAO” [Tweet]. Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/SeafoodWomen/status/1192083221774831616>)

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Image 1. Participants of the informal gender gathering at the International Symposium on Fisheries Sustainability. ©Alvaro Galassi, FAO

- There is an urgent need to address the digital divide and the lack of access for women to information and communication technologies. Women and fisher folk communities in general should be involved and empowered with services and analytics that improve their livelihood and facilitate ownership.

The sessions were also an opportunity to release videos awarded by the competition organised by the International Association for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) from 2017 to 2019. Women from Spain, Madagascar, Peru, Mexico and Canada raised their voices and expressed themselves about their perceptions of the sector, their role and experience, the issues and challenges they faced, but also their hopes and perspectives.

The symposium's closing session strongly highlighted gender emerging as a cross-cutting theme during the symposium and as a priority element in the development of a new vision for fisheries for the 21st century, as captured in Figure 2 with the word cloud of the preliminary results of analysis of the main key messages of the International Symposium on Fisheries Sustainability.

The symposium also provided an opportunity for those involved in gender-related work to come together. Nearly 45 people (whether participants, speakers, panellists or FAO staff) gathered for an informal and unofficial gender “aperitivo” to exchange, discuss and connect about gender inclusion, equity and equality and plans for moving forward.

Gender equality is a complex issue that should be addressed seriously, as would any other complex issue in the sector. This requires developing gender-sensitive policies that

not only consist of counting the number of women and men but also allow the understanding of the roles and responsibilities women play, their access and control over assets, information and technologies, and their participation and opportunities in leadership, as well as the reasons for unequal power relationships. At the same time, corporate social responsibility policies should include gender equality as a social standard and set the conditions to eradicate all gender-based violence and discriminations. Needless to say, one single event alone cannot achieve all this, but it can certainly provide the grounds for a new narrative for fisheries sustainability in which gender inclusion, equity and equality are priorities.

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