



40 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

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ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

Across communities, countries and continents, a singular thread ties this issue of Yemaya together: how women experience fisheries developments differently than men because they occupy different social, economic and political spaces within fishing communities. Consequently, fisheries policies, programmes and political decisions rarely affect women in the same ways they affect men. Yet too often these differences, and the ways women navigate them, remain invisible, overlooked by institutions that continue to design fisheries around a predominantly male-centric understanding of work, livelihoods and governance.

Whether in the fishing villages of Rameswaram and Cuddalore in India, coastal communities in Sri Lanka, or remote harbours across the United Kingdom, women shoulder responsibilities that extend well beyond what conventional fisheries statistics capture. They process and market fish, manage household finances, care for children and elders, preserve ecological and cultural knowledge, sustain local food systems and hold families together through periods of uncertainty. Much of this labour remains invisible, unpaid, informal and unrecognised, despite being indispensable to the survival of fisheries and coastal communities.

The articles in this issue demonstrate that fisheries development and policy interventions often deepen existing gender inequalities when women's realities are not explicitly taken into account. The relentless march of modernisation, and the Blue Economy, may create new opportunities for some, while simultaneously eliminating the post-harvest livelihoods upon which many women depend. Climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation increase food insecurity, health risks and economic precarity, yet women often have fewer resources, less access and less mobility to adapt. Political decisions, such as maritime boundary enforcement, can devastate households in ways that are experienced most acutely by the women left to manage financial collapse, emotional distress and family security. Even well-intentioned conservation and climate initiatives risk reinforcing inequalities when women are excluded from decision-making or treated merely as beneficiaries rather than partners.

Yet the stories in these pages are not narratives of victimhood. They reveal women responding to challenges and developments in ways that frequently differ from men – precisely because their responsibilities, access to opportunities and various other constraints are different from those of men. Women build savings groups, establish support networks, create alternative livelihoods, organize community leadership, restore ecosystems, transmit traditional knowledge, mentor younger generations and advocate for policy change. In so doing, they transform care into resilience, solidarity into collective action, and lived experience into practical solutions that strengthen both communities and ecosystems.

Perhaps the most important lesson emerging from this collection is that women possess knowledge that fisheries governance cannot afford to ignore. Their perspectives illuminate impacts that remain invisible in conventional policy debates, while their responses demonstrate forms of leadership rooted in community well-being, long-term stewardship and social cohesion. Accounting for women's roles and recognising their contributions is therefore not simply a matter of empowerment or equality; it is fundamental to building fisheries that are gender-just, economically resilient and environmentally sustainable.

For policymakers, researchers, NGOs and FWOs, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Gender-responsive fisheries require more than increasing women's participation at meetings or acknowledging their contributions in policy documents. They demand genuine engagement with women's lived experiences, systematic collection of gender-sensitive data, recognition of unpaid and informal labour, investment in women's organizations and leadership, and the willingness to redesign policies that deepen inequalities. The efforts of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples to this end finds mention in this issue.

The women featured throughout these pages remind us that every fisheries policy has gendered consequences, whether recognised or otherwise. As to women's roles in shaping fisheries futures, a pressing concern is whether institutions are prepared to listen, learn and act. Lasting change will come only when women's voices influence the decisions that shape fisheries – and when those decisions consciously and deliberately address the different realities faced by, and the needs and aspirations of, women. Only then can fisheries governance become truly equitable, resilient and sustainable for all. **M**



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Red lines bleed crimson tears

When Rameswaram's boats don't return, the only certainty for fisherwomen and coastal households is prolonged vulnerability

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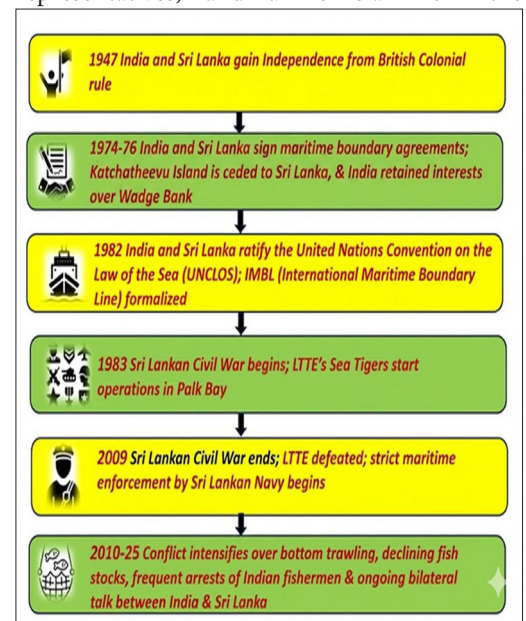
Rameswaram, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, straddles the threshold of land and belief, known for its rich cultural heritage, sacred geography, and long shoreline. Pilgrims arrive for rituals and prayers, but for those who live here, the sea (and fishing) is the backbone of the local economy – and, for most coastal households, the only source of livelihood. Daily life unfolds around the rhythm of boats going out and returning, catches being sold, and the flow of just enough income to sustain families. Women play a central role in sustaining this rhythm, they manage households, prepare meals, send children to school, mend nets, care for elders, and organize family life around the uncertainties of fishing. Their work is continuous, though rarely recognised, and deeply tied to the assumption that the boats, and the men on them, will return.

These assumptions break the moment when news arrives of their men having been arrested for crossing a line. A line? Yes, a red one, though not drawn by ink. One might be inclined to term this a 'line in the sand', if it were not stretched out across the sea. No, this line is invisible, a marker of bounds sketched by policy, dating back to the declaration of the International Maritime Boundary Line in 1974 that formally reinforced the spatial separation of water between India and Sri Lanka, and the subsequent Indo-Sri Lankan fishing agreements. Following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, the line grew starker, and redder, still as it became embedded within a series of policy and developmental milestones. By contrast, the decades-long fisheries conflict that brewed along its margins has been shrouded in shades of grey.

Their impacts, however, are less uncertain. Since 2011, there have been 402 reported incidents, over which 4,921 Indian fishermen were arrested, and 832 boats were seized. Although most detained fishermen were subsequently released through diplomatic interventions, as of 7 January 2025, nearly 96 fishermen remained in detention in Sri Lanka and 251 seized boats remain confiscated. Over its run, the conflict has settled into a familiar pattern: arrests continue, fishers protest and media debates intensify, following which

diplomatic negotiations ensue. Beyond these visible narratives, however, lies a less-seen story, one that plays out not on the water, but inside homes. The arrests happen at sea, but their consequences wash ashore. For families, whose daily, predictable rhythms of life collapse without warning. This study hopes to shed light on this upheaval, examining the lived realities for households in fishing communities after the men are arrested. Its goal is not to debate the legality or morality of crossing maritime boundaries by fishers. Instead, it looks at the aftermath, exploring the specific layers of distress and instability faced by the women impacted by the arrests, as well as the practical strategies they develop to keep their households running while living in a state of prolonged vulnerability.

To document these experiences, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 women directly affected by these arrests, including women whose husbands (as was the case for three women) and sons (the case for two women) were still in detention at the time, as well as nine women whose family members had been released. To provide a broader community perspective, additional interviews were held with an experienced fisherman, local women's representatives, and an official from the



Key milestones in the Indo-Sri Lankan transboundary fisheries conflict



Training provided to fisherwomen for alternative livelihood activities under the Tamil Nadu state government's Kaniyam scheme

Department of Fisheries. The following sections highlight the struggles, coping strategies, and resilience of these women.

Economic distress: The financial collapse of the household

Income disappears overnight, but expenses refuse to wait. As expressed by many women, economic struggles are deepened: as food must be arranged, school fees somehow managed, and household rent and loan instalments must be paid on time. Managing even two meals a day, while comforting children amidst growing uncertainty, becomes an everyday challenge. The financial impact of an arrest extends far beyond the immediate loss of income. Many women reported that their inability to make timely payments damaged their standing within informal lending circles. This loss of “financial credibility” is a long-term burden, one that persists even after a husband or son returns, with affected women finding it difficult to regain the trust of lenders. This creates a secondary crisis, as they are often denied the credit needed to handle future family emergencies or to get back to work.

Psychological distress and the burden of waiting

The sudden economic disruption is accompanied by mounting psychological distress. Minisha, a 27-year-old from Rameswaram, expressed the exhaustion felt by many: “There were moments when I felt like ending my life. Once my husband is released, we will struggle on land, take up any work we find, even beg if needed, but we don’t want to go back to the sea again.” The psychological strain on these women is a direct result of living in a state of “unlimited waiting”. Without clear

updates on legal proceedings or release dates, many women described a state of persistent anxiety where days and weeks passed without any reliable information. The distress grew heavier with the children’s repeated question: “When will Appa come back?”. Over time, this emotional pressure begins to affect their physical health. Many women mentioned symptoms like chronic sleep disruption, persistent physical exhaustion, and loss of appetite.

Social stigma and community pressure

For these women, the distress of an arrest is not only confined to the home, it also follows them into public spaces. Daily interactions with neighbours often revolve around intrusive questioning regarding the detention and legal status of their family members. While these inquiries are frequently presented as sympathetic, they force women to repeatedly confront and explain their situation, resulting in significant emotional exhaustion rather than comfort. As described by one fisherwoman, a simple trip that used to take 30 minutes now takes an hour and a half, as she is constantly stopped by people asking for updates or expressing unsolicited sympathy. Such social interrogations also extend to children, who often face uncomfortable questioning at school, with the scrutiny leading to embarrassment and silent coping among youngsters too.

Navigating safety and security in the absence of men

Many women disheartenedly conveyed that safety became a daily worry. “Without a man in the house, nights become frightening. Sometimes, drunkards knock on our doors, and

During these moments of prolonged uncertainty and recovery, it is the quiet labour of women that holds lives together. Their victories, strength and agency are neither heralded, nor celebrated, and yet they sustain families, safeguard dignity, and carry communities forward

we sit awake, anxious, not knowing what might happen. This is not just my story; many women here are going through the same thing, quietly,” said Loila Teresa, who lives in Rameswaram with her two daughters.

Fishermen similarly expressed the emotional burden of worrying about their family’s safety while in detention. One fisherman reflected, “We struggled a lot in that jail, but thinking about my wife and children alone at home was heavier than everything else.”

Choice and agency in coping strategies

Despite these constraints, the women stood strong, because they had to. They started acting “as him”, they did not remain passive, they responded through continuous, adaptive effort. As one fisherwoman shared, “Even if my husband is arrested, I have to be strong enough to manage everything; if I break down, there will be no one to hold my family together.”

While the burden on these women was immense, they didn’t have to carry it entirely alone. Survival during these months of uncertainty depended on a mixture of support from the local community and official government aid. The government provides a daily relief payment of about Rs 500 to help families cover basic needs. Living in joint families became a practical advantage, as relatives shared food, looked after children, and helped with money. Many women also turned to their parents (their natal families) for financial help or groceries, especially in the first few days after an arrest. When a crisis hit, it was often neighbours who stepped in with small loans or helped with errands and childcare. These personal connections served as a daily safety net that kept households functioning when there was no income coming in.

Managing finances was only one part of survival: to cope with psychological stress and social scrutiny, women relied on their own everyday strategies. Many women took up informal livelihood activities such as net-mending and shell handicraft-making, which not only generate income but also help keep them engaged, providing relief from distressing thoughts. Many women consciously suppress their own emotions in public, believing that strength must be maintained so the household does not fall apart. For many of these women, the presence of their children changed the way they viewed their struggle. Instead of just being another source of worry, their sons and daughters became the primary reason to keep going. The need to provide stability for the children acted as a powerful motivator, pushing them to find work and manage the home even when they felt completely depleted.

At the same time, there was a quiet, firm resolve to protect the family’s reputation. Despite the gossip and the weight of the social

stigma following the arrests, these women made a conscious choice to carry themselves with dignity. They didn’t see themselves as victims to be pitied; they saw themselves as the anchors of their families. A powerful example of this “self-raising” can be seen from the story of Mrs. Suganthi, a fisherwoman who pivoted her challenging situation into a platform for leadership. After gaining mastery in the art of shell handicrafts through training provided by the Tamil Nadu Government, she not only secured her own income, but also became a beacon of hope for her whole community. Today, she has trained more than 500 women in the craft, providing them with a sustainable livelihood that exists independent of the sea’s vagaries.

Over time, collective responses also emerged, with women participating in protests demanding improved relief and compensation during periods when men were under arrest. These efforts led to some improvements in assistance schemes, including an increase in the daily relief amount. However, despite these measures, many households continue to struggle for survival. “We are witnessing their struggle every day. Even though we do not yet know what the long-term solution could be,” said the state fisheries officer at Rameswaram.

Interestingly, many women express empathy toward Sri Lankan fishers as well, recognising shared dependence on dwindling marine resources and similar livelihood pressures. In some households, arrest experiences have led to greater sharing of economic responsibilities, with women taking on more active income-generating roles to reduce future vulnerability.

The boats eventually return and activity at sea begins again, but the debt and emotional strain remain ingrained on the shore. Even when the fishing resumes, the consequences of arrest continue to shape everyday life within households. During these moments of prolonged uncertainty and recovery, it is the quiet labour of women that holds lives together. Their victories, strength and agency are neither heralded, nor celebrated, and yet they sustain families, safeguard dignity, and carry communities forward. Still, beneath the surface waters of these daily survival struggles, some unanswered questions rise like a tide: are these women victims of a man-made crisis? In the din of political discourse dominated by men, will their voices be heard? And will their hopes be answered? ■

Additional Readings: *Support to resolving the transboundary fisheries problem between India and Sri Lanka: A report by R. Manimohan*

Resolving transboundary fishing conflicts in the Palk Bay: Report of a panel discussion prepared by Siddharth Premkumar; 2025

Sri Lanka: Rebuilding lives along a long road full of obstacles

Waiting at the Crossroads

Women in fisheries are bridging climate and biodiversity. Policy needs to catch up

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Women, in all their diversity, across coastal and fishing communities are already building collective responses to environmental change. The challenge now is whether environmental governance and financing systems are willing to recognise, support, and learn from that leadership

Why does coherence among environmental policies matter for coastal and fishing communities?

The climate and biodiversity crises have never been separate realities. Scientific evidence increasingly shows that climate change accelerates biodiversity loss, while ecosystem degradation further undermines climate resilience and adaptation capacities. These overlapping crises disproportionately affect communities whose livelihoods depend directly on ecosystems and natural resources, particularly coastal and small-scale fishing communities (IPBES, 2018; IPCC, 2022).

For many of these communities, environmental crises are experienced simultaneously through declining fish stocks, ecosystem degradation, extreme climate impacts, food insecurity, territorial pressures, and growing socioeconomic inequalities. Yet these impacts are not experienced equally. Existing gender inequalities shape how environmental change is lived, negotiated, and responded to – both within communities and through public policy.

Across coastal territories, women sustain livelihoods and local economies through harvesting, processing, trading, aquaculture, food preparation, and care work. They also contribute to biodiversity conservation, ecosystem stewardship, traditional knowledge transmission, and community resilience. Despite this, their labour and leadership remain systematically undervalued and underrecognised, even though they are essential.

At the same time, environmental governance often remains fragmented. Climate policies, biodiversity strategies, fisheries governance, marine conservation initiatives, and Blue Economy agendas are frequently designed and implemented separately, with limited coordination and insufficient attention to gender equality. As a result, women from coastal and fishing communities continue to confront governance systems that fail to respond to their needs, priorities, and lived experiences.

These are precisely the challenges that the *UNFCCC Gender Action Plan & CBD Gender Plan of Action: Synergies for implementation at national level* (CBD Women's Caucus & Women and Gender Constituency, 2026) briefing seeks to address. Using the Gender Plans of the Rio Conventions as a starting point, the briefing explores how stronger coordination

across environmental policies can support more coherent, gender-responsive, and lasting approaches for both people and planet.

Two Gender Plans with shared ambitions:

The existence of Gender Plans under both the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is politically significant. For decades, gender equality was treated as a secondary or cross-cutting issue within environmental governance rather than as a core condition for effective and just implementation.

Today, both Conventions recognise that environmental action cannot succeed while ignoring structural inequalities and the differentiated impacts environmental crises have on women and girls, particularly those from structurally-excluded groups, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and people of African descent.

The UNFCCC Gender Action Plan seeks to advance gender-responsive climate action through strengthened participation, capacity-building, finance, implementation, and accountability. Similarly, the CBD Gender Plan of Action (Decision 15/11) supports gender-responsive implementation of global biodiversity goals through a human rights-based approach that emphasises women's rights to land and resources, participation and leadership, access to finance and information, and institutional transformation.

While developed through different international processes, the two Gender Plans share important priorities. Both emphasise the need for gender-responsive finance, stronger accountability systems, improved capacity-building, and better collection of sex-disaggregated and gender-responsive data. Both also recognise that gender equality, human rights, and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected.

The joint briefing, developed by the CBD Women's Caucus and the UNFCCC Women and Gender Constituency, argues that these frameworks should not be treated as isolated agendas, but rather as complementary tools that can reinforce one another when implemented in a coordinated manner.

This is important at the national level, where governments are increasingly expected to simultaneously implement biodiversity, climate,



A local fisherwoman displaying some of the fish she and other members of the women's fishing group have caught in local waters and dried for sale in Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

development, and gender commitments. But it is even more important at local scale, because it is on the mari/territories that women already navigate the interconnected impacts of environmental crises and socio-economic inequalities in practice, even when institutions continue to address them separately.

Why does this matter for women from coastal and fishing communities?

These governance gaps are not abstract. They directly shape realities in coastal territories and fishing communities around the world. Marine protected areas, for example, are sometimes established without the meaningful participation of women from fishing communities, despite their important roles in local economies and ecosystem stewardship. Blue economy initiatives are often promoted as pathways for sustainable development while reproducing inequalities, concentrating access to resources, and marginalising small-scale fishers and fishworkers. Climate adaptation projects may focus narrowly on infrastructure or technical responses without recognising broader territorial, social, and biodiversity dimensions.

Across fisheries value chains, women's labour also remains persistently invisible.

Women are heavily involved in post-harvest activities, processing, trade, food provisioning, and community care work, yet much of this labour remains informal, unpaid, or poorly recognised in fisheries policies and economic accounting systems. This invisibilisation has direct consequences for access to decision-making, financing, social protection, and participation in environmental governance.

At the same time, women's organizations and grassroots networks continue to demonstrate that more integrated and community-centred approaches are already possible. Women in small-scale fisheries are not passive victims of environmental crises. Across many territories, women organize collective fisheries management systems, restore mangroves and coastal ecosystems, preserve and transmit traditional ecological knowledge, strengthen local food systems, mobilise community responses to environmental degradation and climate impacts, and stand at the frontlines defending territories and livelihoods.

These experiences challenge dominant narratives that frame women only as vulnerable populations without agency – rather than as political actors, knowledge holders, and leaders of environmental stewardship. This is one of the central critiques and opportunities raised in the joint briefing: women's organizations are strategic implementation partners and must be recognised and resourced as such. This requires moving beyond tokenistic participation towards meaningful inclusion in decision-making, financing, monitoring, and implementation processes at local, national, and international levels.

Towards more coherent and gender-just environmental governance:

Stronger coordination across environmental agreements must ultimately translate into better support, recognition, participation, financing, and rights for women and communities on the ground. Policy coherence should not be understood merely as institutional coordination between ministries or international agreements. It should also mean creating governance systems capable of responding to the realities, knowledge systems, and priorities of communities whose livelihoods depend directly on healthy ecosystems.

Women, in all their diversity, across coastal and fishing communities are already building collective responses to environmental change. The challenge now is whether environmental governance and financing systems are willing to recognise, support, and learn from that leadership. ■

<https://cbdwomencaucus.org/unfccc-gender-action-plan-cbd-gender-plan-of-action-synergies-for-implementation-at-national-level/>

Raise up the Anchors

Women community ambassadors foster leadership, resilience and collective action in the UK's fishing communities

By **Stephanie Lucas**
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Coastal villages and small islands are not merely remote in terms of distance, but research has shown that they can feel far removed from decision-making, funding streams, media attention, and from the broader conversations about the future of fishing

The UK Women in Fisheries network exists for every woman in any part of the UK fisheries and seafood space. Members include vessel owners, women in catching, processors, fleet managers, scientists, fishmongers, conservationists, trainers and the partners of commercial fishermen too. Most of the UK fishing fleet is made up of small-scale, family-owned businesses. Since its founding, UK Women in Fisheries has sought to connect, support, and amplify the voices of women across the UK through networking events (both online and in-person), training opportunities, mentorship programmes and signposting vital resources and fresh opportunities.

As an organization, UK Women in Fisheries has been operating with a small, paid team and strategic leadership for just 18 months and our proudest and most impactful achievements for members include an all-women 'Seas Survival' course with Seafood Cornwall Training, a Women's F-REP (Fisheries Resource Education Programme) delivered with Fishing Into the Future, and a series of important webinars and online training opportunities – from learning about risk assessments, to understanding gender dynamics.

Now, as a more established organization and voice of authority, the leadership team at UK WIF participate in a multitude of forums surrounding the wellbeing and welfare of women working in fisheries. Our incredibly engaged members are now able to deliver the best support for their local communities – from within the community. In April 2026, we launched the Community Ambassador scheme. This opportunity allows for Women in Fisheries members to utilise funding so that the most effective support for women in any community comes from within that same local area.

The problem

The UK fishing industry spans remote and diverse geographies from the Shetland Islands to the comparably tropical southwest of England. Many of the sector's most important communities are remote, rural and isolated. Coastal villages and small islands are not merely remote in terms of distance, but research has shown that they can feel far removed from decision-making, funding streams, media attention, and from the broader conversations

about the future of fishing. For women in these places, that sense of isolation is often compounded, with recent research showing women are experiencing high levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

Women working in fisheries have long been the backbone of their communities, not only contributing economically, but holding together the social fabric of fishing families. They have advocated, organized, supported and spoken out, and have done this entirely unpaid – in addition to taking on a higher share of domestic labour. For too long, women have taken on work within fishing communities without having a financial stake in the family business or receiving any payment. Family businesses often lack the professionalisation and process that would protect women's rights to fair pay, and ensure that everybody's work is fairly compensated and recognised.

Another problem is that the Women in Fisheries team is made up of just one full-time, and two part time, staff, and supported by directors who volunteer their time to give direction and accountability. There simply aren't enough people, nor hours, to reach every community, let alone offer time and build rapport in order to cultivate trusting relationships with each other in-person.

How the Community Ambassador Scheme works

The principle at the heart of the Community Ambassador scheme is straightforward: communities are best served by the people within them. Many of the women in the Women in Fisheries network are already well-connected, highly-respected and embedded members of their communities. They are trusted by peers, acutely familiar with the fishing landscape, and fully understanding of the nuances and complexities of the relationships within the industry.

Ambassadors self-select into the role, applying via a simple online form and engaging in a brainstorming call with myself. Together, we think strategically about how their ideas for engaging in existing events, or creating a new local event, work towards achieving the UK Women in Fisheries mission and align with our values. The application process is intentionally accessible, designed to welcome women who may not have formal qualifications in advocacy or community development, but who bring



Women in Fisheries Resource Education Programme (WIF-REP) took place in London from November 17–20, 2025

the equally important lived experience, local knowledge, and the trust of the community around them. We are open to discussions on any type of activity and have already heard from women wanting to set up coffee mornings, mental health services, networking events, parties for socialising and even training activities.

Once approved, Community Ambassadors gain access to a simple Google Drive full of digital assets and receive some Women in Fisheries branded resources – from stickers and pin badges, to posters and branded lanyards. Community Ambassadors could be representing Women in Fisheries at existing events – common in the summertime across the UK – like Seafood festivals, or Harbour celebrations, or create brand new events to reach their community, attract more Women in Fisheries members, or support the recruitment and retention of staff in the industry.

Most importantly, Community Ambassadors are paid. For the 18 months we have already been operational, we have consistently protected women from requests from organizations (journalists, producers, researchers etc.) for women to contribute their knowledge and expertise with no compensation offered, and we are no different! We will never ask WIF members to work for free because we recognise that women do enough of this already. The skills that women bring to the fishing industry, and the time that they dedicate to it, are worthy of being compensated and we are hugely proud to be able to offer an hourly rate of pay.

Whilst the role of Community Ambassador is not a job, it is the first step in harnessing the

power of women in the seafood space. Many of the Community Ambassadors who have already signed up have worked 3-4 hours a month alongside other jobs, both within and outside of the seafood sector. By utilising the enthusiasm of local Women in Fisheries, we are also reaching women who might never have encountered UK Women in Fisheries through digital channels alone, and we have already seen an increase in membership from these regions.

Early days and early successes

The scheme launched in April 2026, and we are currently in a pilot phase with a small number of founding Community Ambassadors. It would be premature to claim it is fully formed as we are still in the early stages, and learning as we go. But the foundational shape is clear, and the early signs are encouraging.

What we have already seen is the power of self-selection: the women who have come forward are exactly the women we hoped would be and we are still receiving applications and interest. They are passionate, knowledgeable, already connected within their communities, and ready to step into a more formalised version of the convening and supporting roles they have often been playing informally for years. For many of them, the Community Ambassador role represents a recognition of work they have always done, but now with backing, resources, and a platform.

One woman from Cornwall, southwest England, who previously struggled with public speaking has attended a women's networking event and supported new young women

entrants at a local Sea Survival course (the first step of training required to work on commercial fishing vessels).

Another woman from Scotland has used her connections with other local businesses to set up coffee mornings for partners of commercial fishermen. This is becoming a great social resource and opportunity to signpost appropriate organizations offering a variety of support to fishing families.

What comes next

Our ambition is to build a genuinely national network of Community Ambassadors across all four nations of the UK – Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland – ensuring that no fishing community is without a local point of contact, a local champion, and a local link to the wider network.

Alongside that geographic expansion, we are committed to securing the dedicated funding needed to pay Community Ambassadors properly and sustainably. Whilst the hourly rate is competitive, and very welcome, there is a finite

amount of money in the budget for each region, and we aim to secure more funding to continue Community Ambassador activity all year.

Beyond outreach and events, we also see Community Ambassadors becoming a vital pipeline for intelligence and insight. Women on the ground in fishing communities, and at sea, see things that national organizations may miss. They understand the nuances of local industry structures, of seasonal pressures, of relationships between vessel owners and crew and processors and buyers. We need Community Ambassador insights to feed directly into policy and decision-making to ensure that the women closest to the water have a real voice in the rooms where decisions are made. **M**

For more information: <https://www.women-fisheries.com/community-ambassadors>

Read more about the research influencing UK Women in Fisheries: <https://www.women-fisheries.com/research>

To contact Women in Fisheries about Community Ambassadors, please email hello@women-fisheries.com

Women and Gender Constituency

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change space involves a vast amount of technical information, numerous stakeholders and several processes in relation to preparations and participation in global climate negotiations. Those new to the processes and interested in engaging with, or simply following, how women and gender factor into climate change discourse will find the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC) website to be of keen interest. It is a premier digital hub for feminist advocacy, capacity building, and for keeping track of the work of their network members (31 global organizations, nine regional organizations and six national organizations) active in the UNFCCC space. Those interested in collaborating or partnering with WGC can avail of both the information and details regarding the process of joining the constituency or its advocacy efforts.

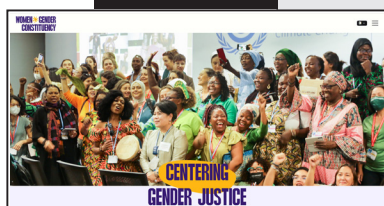
The website is maintained by the WGC, working with the primary mandate of ensuring that women's rights and gender justice are central to the UNFCCC framework. The site's users can access information and resources about identifying entry points for gender aspects within climate debates and raising awareness through information dissemination. The website showcases the WGC's activities through their various thematic working groups: coordinating collective advocacy; supporting regional organizing; ensuring feminist representation; hosting monthly advocacy calls and trainings; and participating at the Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the UNFCCC and the Subsidiary Bodies meetings, for which resources are provided on the website regarding the WGC's areas of work in relation to these forums.

For those seeking deeper analysis and resources on women and gender in relation to climate change, the website has a dedicated 'Resources and Training' page offering a wealth of publications, research, and position papers. These materials are designed to build the capacity of feminist climate advocates to navigate technical negotiations and translate formal recognition into actionable policy. These are also complemented by a media page that acts as a central clearinghouse for dissemination of the constituency's press releases aimed at raising global awareness and ensuring feminist perspectives are visible in climate discourse.

The 'Gender Just Climate Solutions' page highlights practical, successful projects that combine scientific data with community knowledge. Finally, for those in the process of preparing for the climate conference, their 'Road to COP' page provides essential resources for preparation and participation, including highlighting the roles of regional focal points and the schedule for daily Women's Caucus meetings, helping advocates strategise for the global climate negotiation. To stay up to date on the WGC's work, users can also sign up for the Caucus Newsletter.

Website: <https://womengenderclimate.org/about-us/>

What's New, Webby?



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NEENA KOSHY

Fisherwomen vendors, Veravel, Gujarat, India

On the Shores of Tomorrow

Women in coastal fishing communities are reshaping possibilities while navigating social realities

By **Tamara Gan Kristensen**
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The Netherlands

The vital, but often invisible, role of women in the context of small-scale fisheries (SSF) is becoming more recognised, especially as fishers operating within the SSF sector experience various socioeconomic and gender-based challenges in light of industry changes. As recent initiatives promoting the 'Blue Revolution' in India have modernised the fishing sector, the livelihoods of traditional coastal fishing communities have experienced drastic change, ultimately causing many young fishers to seek different avenues of employment and livelihood opportunities.

However, these opportunities are profoundly gendered. Fisherwomen in the Indian context are often undervalued, with their labour being largely unpaid due to the lack of formal representation in organizations or government policies. In addition, social and cultural structures strongly influenced by patriarchal norms – such as women having limited participation in boat fishing or access to travel – remain embedded in the social fabric of fishing communities. Previous research has shown that it is primarily older women, in female-headed households, who have the freedom to travel to different markets and access a wider network of other women that have been able to diversify their work within the fishing sector.

In a fishing hamlet in Tamil Nadu's coastal Cuddalore District, many young women are working with, and pushing against, these boundaries they experience. In challenging the limits imposed upon them, they seek to pursue their aspirations of a better future – not only for themselves, but for generations of girls and women to come.

The fishing hamlet and its inhabitants have unfortunately experienced the brunt of the modernisation of the fishing industry; declining fish stocks along the village coast have prompted fishermen to migrate to bigger fishing harbours, and the women of the village have lost access to the post-harvest work that would have followed coastal fishing.

Traditionally, the women would participate in post-harvest activities such as cutting, drying and selling fish. This is no longer the reality for many young women in the village.

As one young woman noted, "Nowadays, the fish catch is so small that few to no women are participating."

While the loss of fish stock has affected the entire village financially, young fishermen have largely remained in fishing occupations by being able to migrate to fishing harbours such as Cuddalore or Chennai. However, young women do not experience similar opportunities of mobility. In addition to the gender-based divisions of labour within the fishing industry that prevent young women from going out to sea, their husbands or families tend to be authoritative figures in a young woman's pathway to pursuing other opportunities. "The husband and the in-laws are the pillars of the house in a woman's life" is a common refrain that illustrates this reality.

Moreover, physical barriers such as access to transportation make it all the more difficult to find employment beyond village borders. As one woman lamented, "There are no bus facilities in this village." Another young woman shared that while she managed to get a job in the city, the opportunity ultimately proved to be fleeting as she "couldn't get there on time [since] this village doesn't have any good bus or auto facilities."

While a Tamil Nadu government scheme called the 'Zero-Ticket Bus Travel' (ZTBT) provides women with free travel in certain state-run buses, realising its benefits has proven difficult for many young women. Buses may arrive much earlier or later than expected, leading to women either having to endure long waits at the bus stop, or resort to alternative paid modes of transportation.

Some women also feared the gossip associated with leaving the village for work, as one woman shared: "I would come home at 10 p.m. and it was too late. People were talking badly about me."

With unreliable facilities and the pressure of social surveillance, the women in the village acknowledged that only "women with less commitment to their families will do fish selling". As a result, many young women have eschewed outward mobility pathways, and turned inwards to transform and adapt village-level constraints into strategies for pursuing their aspirations.

One of the most prominent ways they have negotiated employment within such imposed bounds is through the '100 days work' scheme. This social programme, formerly known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), is an initiative enacted by the Government of India, in which state-level governments provide at least 100 days of guaranteed employment per year (this has been raised to 125 days per household per year through a 2025 law) to any adult in a rural household, with wages set at the statutory minimum rate for both men and women. For the most part, registration for this programme is accessible to women in the village, but with the stipulation that they are native to the village.

While not specifically targeted towards women, the '100 days work' programme had become a woman-centric initiative catalysing economic advancement and financial literacy for those who do have the access to it. One of the women interviewees shared that they "can easily get loans from banks and other benefits with it. If [they] can't go outside for work, [they] can at least do [this programme]". For many, this programme allowed the women to secure financial stability within the social and spatial boundaries they face, as one woman explained: "The 100 Days Work is inside the village, that's why [her husband] allows it".

Beyond the guarantee of employment, the programme became an enclave of mutual support and collective resilience for its participants. Through their involvement in the programme, young women fostered a sense of solidarity with one another that often extends into pursuing other goals together. As one woman mentioned, "Because I am [part of] 100 Days Work, I know a lot of women, so the women support me well." The 100 Days Work programme thus served as a meaningful social space for building support networks for women, and oftentimes after completing the day's work, the women would continue to spend time together under the trees or by the beach and share stories over tea.

The programme has not only strengthened the material and communal reciprocity between the young women participating in the programme, but also promotes shared participation in other self-employment initiatives. For example, vetiver knitting as a self-employment opportunity is generally carried out collaboratively. As one woman said, "If 10 of us do it, we can knit more, and ask for more money." These social networks, built through spending time together through the programme, then eventually culminate into further opportunities and sharing of knowledge for other self-employment strategies.



Fisherwomen at a convivial gathering after a morning of exertion as part of the '100 days work' programme in Tamil Nadu, India

However, as previously mentioned, women's access to these social networks and communal support structures is contingent on their nativity to the village. For those not deemed native, this adds another layer of constraint, highlighting how different life factors may intersect to compound barriers to pursuing certain goals.

While the above examples highlight instances of young women redefining how they experience certain boundaries in order to aspire for better livelihoods, other young women have been actively pushing against them. In these situations, it becomes remarkably clear how intergenerational support affects young women's abilities to recalibrate their life trajectories. While some mothers aspired for their daughters to thrive within the current structures of the village, others desired to change these social realities for their daughters. One young woman told us, "My mother is my hero, she supports me in my studies (...) women are realising their self respect, but

In addition to the gender-based divisions of labour within the fishing industry that prevent young women from going out to sea, their husbands or families tend to be authoritative figures in a young woman's pathway to pursuing other opportunities

always very late. Even my mother realised too late for herself, but she realised it for me early.”

When young women receive such support from their mothers, it translates directly into concrete resistance against patriarchal constraints. With her mother’s advocacy and support, one young woman mentioned that she “didn’t face any barriers to work and study because [her] mother is supportive”, which empowered her to reject a marriage arrangement and prioritise her aspirations for employment.

This collective reimagination of intergenerational aspirations, where mothers

transform their own constrained capabilities into expanded possibilities for their daughters, is summarised by one of the mothers thusly: “I was not able to continue my dream, but my daughter should be able to.” Indeed, as Arjun Appadurai noted, “Aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life.” These women’s stories thus show us how they incrementally reclaim and redefine the boundaries of what they, and future generations of young women will, have the capacity to imagine and aspire towards. ■



PROFILE

Sharon Maiseveni – The woman who refused to let the Sea go to waste

Sharon Maiseveni’s women-led fisheries enterprise in Papua New Guinea is on a mission to connect sustainable fisheries development to responsible stewardship, family welfare and community resilience

By **Siddharth Premkumar**
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Sharon Maiseveni

Given the limited opportunities for formal employment in remote island settlements, she understood how the distance between a fisher and the market could determine whether a family could afford to pay for their daily needs, let alone school fees

On the islands of Papua New Guinea’s Milne Bay Province, where the sea is legacy, livelihood, linkage, lodestone and larder, opportunity has ever arrived with the tides – and proven just as fickle. Fishers would return to shore with valuable hauls from spending hours on the water, only to lose part of their catch to spoilage before reaching the marketplace. Coveted species found ready buyers, while

“fishers don’t lose income” due to selective purchasing.

Overcoming the challenges posed by limited infrastructure, she designed the business around strengthening market access, improving pricing fairness, reducing wastage through better handling of catch, and promoting sustainable use of marine resources by sensitising fishers on the need to avoid undersized catches and respect spawning periods.

“We sit with the fishermen and talk to them directly,” she said. “Sometimes we go out with them to demonstrate how to fish responsibly and take care of the reefs.” Besides raising awareness on appropriate gear use, responsible harvesting and reef protection, Sharon and her team conduct practical training sessions and hands-on demonstrations to help drive these lessons home.

Beyond capacity-building and community engagement, her business is tackling the lack of adequate cold storage infrastructure with support from a UNDP-led enterprise initiative that is expected to reduce costs from renting processing facilities once completed. Plans for solar-powered refrigeration and ice-making systems also promise to ensure stable cold chains – a persistent challenge in rural fisheries – while reducing dependence on costly fuel and unreliable electricity.

Increasing fisher incomes equates to better livelihood certainty and greater household stability, as does the hiring of women in administration, processing, and community outreach – creating new pathways into a sector traditionally dominated by men and helping ensure economic benefits are shared more equitably. In so doing, Sharon links fisheries development to broader questions of family welfare and community resilience.

“It is challenging, but I believe in creating opportunities for women and families,” she noted. “Through this work, we can help support school fees, daily needs, and better livelihoods.”

Hers is a story of uncommon perseverance and rootedness: of how sustainable development begins with local people shaped by the same challenges they seek to address – and willing to solve problems others have learned to endure. ■

those deemed to be lacking commercial value were discarded. The post-harvest losses ate into already uncertain incomes and the narrowing margins compounded household worry – the growing pressure on shore was mirrored in the mounting burden on the reefs that sustained generations.

For years, Sharon Maiseveni observed this troubling dichotomy, of abundance and scarcity, from Saiwaga village, where fishing is less a profession than a way of life. Given the limited opportunities for formal employment in remote island settlements, she understood how the distance between a fisher and the market could determine whether a family could afford to pay for their daily needs, let alone school fees. Rather than accept such realities as inevitable, Sharon envisioned a different future – one in which the fisheries could sustain both people and the marine ecosystems on which they depend.

Today, she manages Refah Fisheries Suppliers, a growing enterprise that has become an engine of change for coastal communities across Gamadoudou Ward in Huhu LLG. The business involves purchasing a wide selection of fish, including mackerel, tuna, trevally, and reef species, directly from local fishers and supplying them to buyers in town. By stepping in to “buy more of the catch”, Sharon said, it ensures the

‘Ripples of renewal, Waves of change’

Empowering women in fisheries to improve livelihoods, advance food sovereignty and champion ecological stewardship

By **Akino Milligan** (akino@koneko.ca), Policy, Research and Advocacy Intern, National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), Sri Lanka

Aqua Ecology is a grassroots framework that combines social justice, sustainability, and food sovereignty. By following this framework and supporting women in fisheries, women and their communities can enjoy improved livelihoods, health, equality, and ecology

In the backrooms of fish markets, the living rooms of fishing households, and fisheries management meetings, women are working unseen, unrecognised, and unsupported. Fisheries are male-dominated because the work is traditionally gendered, and systemic barriers make it difficult for women to participate. This negatively impacts community livelihoods, health, social justice, and ecology. Despite the lack of support, women perform important work at all levels of the fisheries value chain. Through grassroots efforts and policy changes aligned with Aqua Ecology, these women can be better supported and included, leading to improved outcomes for all.

It is well-known that women and men in fisheries tend to have different roles and responsibilities. Compared to men, women are more likely to gather shellfish from the shore and work in post-harvest roles like processing, trading, marketing, finances, and logistics. This division of labour is real, but roles are also viewed through the gender lens because of social expectations, biases, and a persistent lack of data accounting for women's contributions. A lot of post-harvest work also happens in homes rather than in public markets, which can render women's roles even less visible. As a result, men in fishing communities are often seen as providers, while women are seen as homemakers or even “fisher wives.”

Systemic barriers also make it difficult for women to fully participate in fisheries. In homes, markets, and meetings, women often have less power to make their own decisions. They also have less access to finance, information, opportunities, support systems, equipment, and land. They can face discrimination and violence, or simply not be treated as professionals. In many cultures, women are also expected to devote a lot of time on household duties on top of their paid work, saddling them with extremely heavy workloads. Women are often excluded from fisheries management, too: either entirely or by not being afforded opportunities to participate meaningfully.

Climate change compounds these inequalities. Consequently, women experience greater health and safety risks, income gaps, and food insecurity, and have more trouble recovering after climate shocks. All of these issues are made worse for women living with

intersecting inequalities in areas such as age, ethnicity, class, nationality, disability, and sexuality.

Women's work and achievements, at all levels of fisheries: from harvesting to management, often get overlooked. This invisibilisation, in addition to the weak support they receive, harms women and their communities. Livelihoods are affected, as women end up working jobs that are unpaid or poorly paid. This in turn contributes to the greater incidence of low incomes and high poverty rates among women compared to men – disparities made worse when industrial fishing displaces them into even lower-paying jobs.

Women also suffer more from malnutrition and food insecurity, which can impact their health and further limit livelihood opportunities. Malnutrition in particular can plague children and communities for generations. In terms of social justice benchmarks, fishing communities often exhibit low achievement rates in empowerment and gender equality. In addition, there are also environmental concerns that accompany the disregarding and exclusion of women in fishing communities, since they often have specialised ecological knowledge and skills.

Change is, therefore, needed in order to ensure that women can be empowered, systemic barriers can be challenged, and women's roles can gain their due recognition and become more formalised. To meet these goals, the idea of ‘Aqua Ecology’ can be used to support women, their communities, and their natural environments. Aqua Ecology is a grassroots framework that brings together sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty in fisheries. It empowers fishing communities to take up leadership roles, strengthen their local economies, defend traditional knowledge, and practice sustainable fishing. Recognising and supporting women is an important part of this framework.

At the grassroots level, communities can come together to work towards these goals. Women living within food systems can empower and support one another, with the help of communities and civil society organizations. This kind of capacity-building action is already happening around the world, and lessons can be learned from ongoing community efforts in Sri Lanka and Canada.



Traditional fishing boats on a beach in Matara district, Sri Lanka. Women have limited access to boats like these, as well as resources like finances, equipment, and support systems

In rural Sri Lanka, many groups of women have come together to pool money so that members can access loans when they are in need. These groups empower women living within food systems to increase their access to resources, build strong networks, and develop new skills. On top of saving money, they organize community fundraisers and run small businesses that sell homemade foods or crafts. One group in Kurunegala district even harvests rice together and is saving up to buy their own land. In addition to supporting each other, these women's groups strengthen their communities by hosting events to promote food security, and distribute food aid to their neighbours. Such contributions are especially impactful, as was demonstrated most recently following the devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah in late 2025.

While these groups organize and manage their own activities, they can, and do, receive support from non-governmental and non-profit organizations. For example, Sri Lanka's National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) supports several women's groups by

donating money, physical goods, and emergency aid, and offering practical advice. NAFSO's district coordinators follow up with women's groups regularly to assess their progress and offer support. While the women continue to struggle, they are seeing positive outcomes like increased savings, growing businesses, and positive community engagement. These groups are good examples of how women in food systems can become empowered to increase their capacity, agency, and access to resources while supporting their communities. The support they receive from NAFSO also shows how civil society organizations can work to strengthen grassroots efforts.

When it comes to women's leadership in fisheries, lessons can be learned from a case study led by Dr. Sarah Harper in 2018. The study explores how, in 2015, there was a crisis in British Columbia, Canada, when stocks of Pacific herring were almost depleted due to industrial fishing. In response, women from the Heiltsuk First Nation led grassroots efforts that pressured the Canadian government to co-manage fisheries with Indigenous communities. To boost their credibility, Heiltsuk women reclaimed their traditional roles as respected leaders, mothers, caretakers, teachers, and healers. This made it clear that they were not just defending fish, but the wellbeing of their children, future generations, ecosystems, and culture. Women led protests, and played important roles in communication, planning, fundraising, networking, and youth engagement. Their efforts ultimately led to positive, systems-level change, and highlighted how women can use their traditional roles to increase legitimacy, authority and credibility in fisheries. As well, the episode demonstrated how including and respecting women in leadership roles can lead to food systems that are more just, equitable and sustainable.

In sum, to complement community efforts, governments and partner actors should work to empower, support, and include women in fisheries. This can involve:

- Investing in girls' and women's education
- Developing training programmes and financial services for women entrepreneurs
- Increasing women's access to equipment
- Including women in communication materials to increase their visibility
- Building capacity among stakeholders to consider gender when developing policies and funding projects
- Ensuring that ministries relevant to fisheries have strong gender equality policies
- Mainstreaming gender into all policies and programmes
- Collecting and analysing gender-sensitive data

- Researching women's roles and impacts in fisheries
- Balancing empowerment efforts with the realities of women's household duties to avoid increasing their workloads to unsustainable levels

Through community efforts and policy changes, women's roles in fisheries can become more inclusive, visible and appreciated. Women must be empowered and supported, systemic

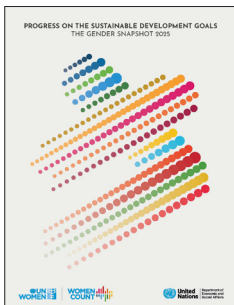
barriers must be challenged and surmounted, and women's roles must be studied and showcased. **M**

This article was informed by published literature on women in fisheries, including the Heiltsuk case study: https://www.aquaculturewithoutfrontiers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Harper2018_Article_IndigenousWomenRespondToFisher.pdf



Milestones

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Small steps to Elusive Goals

SDGs Gender Snapshot 2025 report reveals hopeful progress, continued cause for worry and a whole lot of stagnation

UN Women has developed the Beijing+30 Action Agenda with six priority actions to accelerate progress on both the Platform for Action and the SDGs, positioning gender equality at the heart of global development efforts. The agency's 'Gender Snapshot' 2025 report assesses progress in the SDGs related to each of these six actions, among which climate justice is of high importance especially with respect to fisheries. As well, every SDG is assessed with particular respect to its gender-specific indicators.

Turn to page 24 of the report and you see the chapter heading "From fisheries to climate talks, women play vital roles – but not on equal terms". Four of the SDG are lumped together (45 total indicators, 1 gender specific indicator!) A central finding here is that women remain significantly underrepresented in primary fisheries production, holding only 24 percent of jobs in the primary fisheries and aquaculture sector. However, their participation increases sharply in downstream segments: "rising to about 62% in the processing subsector." This is not really new information. An exploratory paper that looked at women employed at various levels in a local shrimp processing unit in Asia clearly highlighted this pattern: it was the men who owned and did all the important work, while women handled the processing at freezing temperatures for low wages. Not that things were much different in Europe: the experience from Europe's small-scale fisheries sector indicated that when women stepped into power roles, the terms of reference were modified and they were no longer the decision-makers.

Back to the Gender Snapshot report: as the afore-mentioned chapter points out, it is not only in terms of livelihoods that we need to be concerned about women's participation. Women must be included in critical decisions to both protect marine ecosystems and coastal livelihoods. Again, mere participation is not enough as this alone may not necessarily lead to policies that are gender-sensitive or gender-responsive.

Climate change emerges as a major threat multiplier for women in fisheries-dependent communities, with the report warning that, under a worst-case scenario, "climate change may push up

to 158.3 million more women and girls into extreme poverty by 2050" – sub-Saharan Africa accounts for nearly half of this figure. These are regions where small-scale fisheries are critical for livelihoods and food security. Climate impacts also heighten food insecurity, with projections of "up to 236 million more women and girls" becoming food insecure. These dynamics disproportionately affect women in coastal and riparian communities who already face limited access to land, credit, technology and decision-making spaces.

The report highlights that women's voices remain largely absent from climate and marine governance. Only "39% of countries have established national coordination mechanisms [...] to integrate gender equality into climate policymaking." This omission is particularly consequential for fisheries, where climate adaptation, marine spatial planning and resource allocation decisions shape livelihood security.

As ever, data remain hauntingly deficient. The report underscores the importance of gender-responsive data and financing. Despite the centrality of women to fisheries value chains, gender data systems remain underfunded: "only 26% of countries [...] had comprehensive systems to track resource allocations for gender equality." This gap limits evidence-based policymaking in fisheries and aquatic food systems.

Going through the report, under SDG 5 on Gender Equality, I was struck by the finding that 'the gender gap in mobile phone ownership had narrowed'. This is a good thing – from access to customers, to accessing education and creating awareness on a variety of essential subjects, including hygiene and safety, apart from entertainment, the mobile phone has become an essential item for women in fisheries. So, that sounds good! And I hope that such small steps will grow into big leaps **M**

Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2025 by UN Women and UN DESA, 2025:

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2025-en.pdf>

Mainstreaming the Margins

The WFFP is transforming the visibility of fisherwomen's labour through global advocacy, leadership and collective action

By **Prabath Sandaruwan Wijesinghe Abeygunawardene** (prabathwffp@gmail.com), Media Coordinator, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), Sri Lanka

WFFP plans for every country to develop its own action plan, in order to ensure sustained visibility for fisherwomen's labour through ongoing, context-specific actions that are coordinated globally, thereby systematically eradicating invisibility over time

The World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) has consistently placed the rights and recognition of fisherwomen at the heart of its global struggle for justice in the fisheries sector. Fisherwomen's labour – encompassing not only the act of fishing, but also post-harvest processing, local marketing, household sustenance, and the transmission of traditional knowledge – has for too long remained invisible, undervalued, and unprotected. Drawing directly from the key takeaways discussed at the Global Fisherwomen Assembly (GFA) held in Thailand in 2025, this report details WFFP's significant achievements centered around the International Fisher Women Day (IFWD) on November 5, the transformative five-week campaign of 2025, our global-scale actions to address injustices, violence against women, as well as the meaningful events organized to commemorate International Women's Day on March 8, 2026. The intent here is to emphasise how WFFP has worked to address the invisibility of fisherwomen's labour, our concrete plans to eradicate it, and our strong organizational commitment to this vital cause.

Securing global recognition for November 5 - International Fisher Women's Day

The successful marking of November 5 as International Fisher Women's Day (IFWD) is a major milestone in our activism work. Through years of persistent advocacy and international mobilisation, this day is now recognised and celebrated in many countries around the world. This achievement represents a powerful step toward global acknowledgment of the unique contributions of, and challenges faced by, fisherwomen. Participants at the GFA 2025 noted that the next critical step is to fine-tune a global set of demands that can unite our movement. Equally important, WFFP has begun the vital work of recording our history – the stories, struggles, resilience, and achievements of our fisherwomen – to create a lasting legacy for current and future generations to look to. This process, initiated through the IFWD, directly tackles invisibility by ensuring that the labour and lives of fisherwomen are recorded and honoured, rather than erased from historical narratives. At the same time, we recognise that such efforts at documentation need to be

much more in-depth, and we are committed to expanding this work as a foundational element of our strategy to make fisherwomen's labor permanently visible and celebrated.

The Five-Week Campaign: Illuminating the many dimensions of fisherwomen's labour

The five-week campaign organized in 2025, running from November 5 to December 10, stands as one of our most effective tools for combating the invisibility of fisherwomen's labour. This campaign was implemented across numerous regions, with strong participation and leadership from our members in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and several Caribbean nations, as well as in other countries, including India and Kenya, through our extensive global network. Each week was carefully themed to illuminate different aspects of fisherwomen's work and rights, thereby bringing their often-hidden labour into public view and fostering regional ownership of the various highlighted challenges and concerns.

During **Week 1, from November 5 to 11**, under the theme **"Gender Rights & Violence Against Women"**, the focus was on the empowerment of women fishers, addressing gender-based violence (GBV), and advocating for gender equality in fisher communities. Activities over the course of this week made visible the intersecting oppressions that fisherwomen face in carrying out their daily labour, highlighting how gender discrimination and violence can marginalise their contributions and limit their participation in decision-making.

Week 2, from November 12 to 18, themed **"Asserting Fisher Identity"**, promoted the critical importance of maintaining and asserting traditional, artisanal, and indigenous fisher identities. Fisherwomen are often the primary bearers and transmitters of these identities through their work in fishing, processing, and community life. By asserting these identities, the campaign helped counteract the cultural invisibility that diminishes recognition of their essential role in preserving heritage and sustaining communities.

The **third week, from November 19 to 25**, on **"Community & Customary Rights"**, placed emphasis on protecting the collective rights of fishing communities, with particular attention to territory and cultural heritage. This



Commemoration of the First International Fisher Women's Day on 5th November 2025, Sri Lanka

theme revealed how fisherwomen's labour is inextricably linked to communal well-being and customary practices, making their work visible as a cornerstone of community resilience rather than an individual or hidden effort.

From **November 26 to December 2**, the week themed **"Protect Waters; Protect Life"** drew attention to climate change, environmental degradation, and the urgent need for sustainability in fishery management. Fisherwomen's intimate knowledge of waters and ecosystems, gained through their labour, positions them as key actors in environmental stewardship. The campaign used this week to render that ecological labour visible and to critique approaches that often overlook or harm their traditional practices.

The **final week, from December 3 to 10**, themed **"Fisher's Rights as Human Rights"**, focused on recognising fisher rights as fundamental human rights, with a strong emphasis on legislative advocacy and legal strategies. By situating fisherwomen's labour within a human rights framework, this week elevated its status, demanding that it be seen, protected, and supported through laws and policies at the national and international levels.

While the campaign achieved widespread engagement and successfully raised the profile of these issues, the GFA 2025 discussions stressed the need for a thorough assessment so that the campaign can be fully owned and adapted. WFFP plans for every country to

develop its own action plan, in order to ensure sustained visibility for fisherwomen's labour through ongoing, context-specific actions that are coordinated globally, thereby systematically eradicating invisibility over time.

Tackling violence against women: International actions and internal safeguards

The measures adopted by WFFP to tackle violence against women on a global scale are deeply integrated into this visibility work. The first week of the campaign specifically addressed gender rights and violence against women, promoting empowerment and equality in fisher communities. We advocate for systemic changes that protect fisherwomen from GBV, which frequently serves to silence their voices and render their labour invisible. Development and adoption of a dedicated policy against sexual harassment was a significant step for WFFP. This policy safeguards women within our own organization, creates safe spaces for participation, and sets a standard for the broader movement. These combined actions, thematic campaigning, advocacy and internal policy were launched to remove barriers preventing fisherwomen from fully gaining visibility and leadership, both at the community-level and globally.

International Women's Day 2026: An event to sustain momentum

On March 8, 2026, WFFP organized a significant event to mark International Women's Day, building directly on the key takeaways and



Commemoration of the First International Fisher Women's Day on 5th November 2025, Bangladesh

momentum from the GFA 2025. This event provided a global platform for fisherwomen and allies to reflect on achievements, share strategies, and reinforce our collective demands. It highlighted the indispensable importance of fisherwomen's labour to food security, community economies, and cultural continuity, while advancing our plans to make this labour fully visible. The event connected the International Fisher Women's Day celebrations, the five-week campaign themes, and our broader fight against invisibility and violence, in addition to demonstrating the continuity of our activism across key dates in the calendar for women's rights.

Strengthening structures for lasting visibility and eradication of invisibility

To ensure these gains are institutionalised and expanded, WFFP has taken important steps to strengthen our organizational structures for women's participation. As per the outcomes of the eighth General Assembly (GA8) and discussions at the GFA 2025, the women's assembly nominated one member to the Coordinating Committee (CC), with Faye from PAMALAKAYA in the Philippines selected as the interim representative. Other nominees included Susan from the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organizations (CNFO), Yasmine Kasmi from Pakistan, Subashini Kamalanathan from Sri Lanka, and Benchawan Pengnoo from Thailand. This inclusive and regionally diverse leadership

ensures that our efforts to fine-tune demands, assess campaigns, and develop action plans are guided by those directly affected, guaranteeing that the invisibility of fisherwomen's labour is addressed from the ground up.

Our unwavering commitment to fisherwomen's visibility and rights

In conclusion, the achievements WFFP has realised – the growing recognition of November 5 as International Fisher Women's Day, the impactful five-week campaign that illuminated multiple dimensions of fisherwomen's labour, our targeted actions and policy to address violence against women, and the inspiring International Women's Day event of 2026 – are direct results of deep and sustained organization-wide commitment. We have effectively tackled the invisibility of fisherwomen's labour through recognition, historical documentation, identity assertion, rights framing, and inclusive structures. Our future plans to eradicate this invisibility center on deepening our historical legacy, concretising regional action plans, refining global demands, and maintaining united voices in all advocacy spaces. This work benefits not only fisherwomen, but women in general, and strengthens our collective fight for gender justice. WFFP remains fully committed to this path, confident that through continued solidarity and strategic action, the labour of fisherwomen will be universally visible, respected, and protected. 🗨️

DOCUMENTARY

The Last of the Sea Women

Directed by Sue Kim; Produced by A24
Duration: 87 mins; Language: Korean

By Amélie Tapella
 (amelie.icsf@gmail.com), Programme
 Manager, ICSF, Italy

South Korea's Jeju Island is famous, we are told in *The Last of the Sea Women*, for three things: rocks, wind, and women. This is a film about small-scale fishing women who have shaped an island and its ecosystem, and now find themselves in a race against forces they can see but struggle to stop: warming seas, contaminated waters, ageing bodies, and the absence of a younger generation willing to follow in their footsteps.

The film profiles the 'haenyeo', Jeju's community of female free-divers, who for centuries have harvested seafood from the ocean floor using only their breath, their bodies, and self-imposed rules to keep the sea alive. It is also a document of what is lost as women's knowledge, small-scale fisheries and community-based stewardship disappear.

The haenyeo are mostly in their sixties, seventies and eighties. They begin work at 7:30 a.m., spend four hours at sea, diving up to 300 times a day, holding their breath for up to two minutes and descending more than five metres, the depth at which pressure makes each ascent gruelling. They collect abalone, sea urchins and sea snails, then spend another four hours ashore preparing it for sale, with the full value chain in their hands.

"If I catch a lot, I am not tired," one woman says. "If I catch little, I am. But the ocean always moves me."

At its peak in the 1960s, the haenyeo community numbered around 30,000 on an island of 200,000 people. Girls once began training at seven, becoming full haenyeo by their mid-teens. Today, fewer than 4,000 remain, and this generational rupture is one of their quiet tragedies. Following UNESCO's 2016 recognition of the haenyeo as Intangible Cultural Heritage, a training school opened at Gwideok: of the 840 trained, just five percent have continued to practise. The work is too hard, the young say, and there are other options now. Still, a handful of women in their thirties have chosen to become haenyeo, using social media to reach younger audiences and carry the tradition forward.

The haenyeo model also rewards environmental attention. They avoid oxygen tanks, relying instead on artisanal tools, seasonal

limits and collective rules. It is a community-led system built by women who depended on it for survival and passed it down intact. Agricultural runoff poisons the sea floor, seagrasses have disappeared, warming currents have brought tropical and invasive species to Jeju, and marine species are retreating to greater depths, raising an uncomfortable question: how much longer will this work remain possible?

The haenyeo were among the first to act after Japan's 2023 decision to release treated wastewater from Fukushima into the Pacific, a process expected to last decades. The women joined environmental protests, and Soon Deok Jang, one of the oldest haenyeo, travelled to Geneva to address the UN Human Rights Council. The scene is powerful, but unsettling too, raising a question familiar to small-scale fisheries communities: how much weight is given to the testimony of those who depend on threatened environments, when decisions are shaped by states, industries and experts far removed from local realities?

"If I met someone who thought it right to dump contaminated water into the sea, I would ask them: don't you have a future?", Sohee Jin, the youngest haenyeo, says.

A decade prior to the film, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) called for fishers and fishworkers to be treated as rights-holders, with access to decent work, social protection, health, safety and gender equality. The haenyeo's experience shows how incomplete this vision remains in practice. They symbolise Jeju's identity, yet recognition has not been matched by labour protection or social security. Their work involves risks, including strong currents, hypoxia, disorientation, exhaustion and injury. Assistance is available to families when a haenyeo dies at sea, but injured divers often have no formal protection and must rely on family or community support.

The haenyeo are not merely the last representatives of a fast-disappearing world, but sentinels of a future that concerns everyone. Their struggle connects food sovereignty, labour, gender, ecological knowledge, cultural continuity and ocean justice. They remind us that stewardship is a lived practice embedded in memory, collective rules and responsibility across generations, and this is why we should all care. **Y**



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Writers and potential
 contributors to YEMAYA,
 please note that write-ups
 should be brief, about 2000
 words. They could deal with

issues that are of direct
 relevance to women and men
 of fishing communities. They
 could also focus on recent
 research or on meetings and
 workshops that have raised
 gender issues in fisheries.
 Also welcome are life stories
 of women and men of fishing
 communities working towards
 a sustainable fishery or for a

recognition of their work within
 the fishery. Please also include
 a one-line biographical note on
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