

Towards feminist food sovereignty: An Aqua Ecological approach

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Introduction

Women and men in aquatic food systems often have different roles and responsibilities. For example, women are more likely to be “gatherers” who collect shellfish from the shore, while men are more likely to be “fishers” who go out to sea. Women are also more likely to work in post-harvest roles like processing, trading, marketing, finances, and logistics. This division of labour is real, but fisheries are also seen as fundamentally male because of social expectations, biases, and a lack of data that account for women. A lot of women’s work also happens in homes rather than in public markets, which can make their roles even less visible. As a result, men in fishing communities are often seen as providers, while women are seen as home caretakers or even “fisher wives.” Systemic barriers also make it difficult for women to fully participate in aquatic food systems. In homes, markets, and meetings, women often have less power to make their own decisions. They also have less access to resources like money, information, opportunities, support systems, equipment, and land. This can be made worse by gendered norms and social expectations, especially when women face discrimination or violence. In many cultures, women are also expected to spend a lot of time on household duties on top of their paid jobs, meaning they end up with very heavy workloads. They can also get left behind when technology improves.^{2,6} Women are often excluded from fisheries management, too: either entirely, or through an inability to participate fully.

Climate change makes all these inequalities even worse. As a result, women can be more severely impacted by climate shocks than men, facing increased workloads, decreased access to resources, and limited decision making power. They experience greater health and safety risks, income gaps, and food insecurity, and have more trouble recovering after

climate shocks. All of these issues are worse for women who live with intersectional inequalities in areas like age, class, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and sexuality.

Despite these challenges, women work at all levels of fisheries. However, their achievements often get overlooked, and they receive weak social, financial, and policy support. This harms women and their communities by impacting livelihoods, social justice, health, and ecology. Change is therefore needed so that women can be empowered, systemic barriers can be challenged, and women's roles can become more official. To meet these goals, Aqua Ecology can be used to support women, their communities, and their natural environments.

Aqua Ecology is a grassroots framework that combines ecological sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty in aquatic food systems. It empowers communities to take leadership, strengthen their local economies, defend traditional knowledge, and practice sustainable fishing. Recognising and supporting women is an important part of this framework.

Impacts of gender inequalities

Livelihoods

Women in fisheries are more likely than men to have jobs that are unpaid or poorly paid. This leads to lower incomes and higher rates of poverty among women, made worse when industrial fishing displaces them into even lower-paying jobs. This affects women and their communities, as women are less able to use their earnings to invest in local economies. Women's exclusion from fisheries management further reinforces these inequalities.

Social Justice

Aquatic food systems often see low achievements in women's empowerment and gender equality, especially for women living with intersecting inequalities.

Health

Women suffer more than men from malnutrition and food insecurity, which can impact their health and further limit their wages, learning potential, and life opportunities. When women are malnourished, the nutrition, growth, learning, and earning capacity of their children can also be harmed for generations. Health impacts are made worse by climate change and intersectional inequalities.

Ecology

In many communities, women have specialized knowledge and skills that make food systems, households, and communities more resilient to climate change. As such, excluding women from aquatic food systems can lead to worse ecological outcomes.

Case Studies

Rural women's groups in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka

In rural Kurunegala district, Sri Lanka, several groups of women have come together to save money so that members can access loans when they are in need. These groups empower women to increase their access to resources, build strong networks, and develop new skills while supporting their communities. On top of saving money, many of these groups also practice entrepreneurship and income diversification as part of their empowerment. They farm rice, organize fundraisers, make and sell crafts, run small businesses, and distribute humanitarian aid to their neighbours. These groups are examples of how women living within food systems can become empowered to increase their capacity, agency, and access to resources while supporting their communities.

Heiltsuk women leaders in British Columbia, Canada

In 2015, there was a crisis in British Columbia, Canada, when Pacific herring almost ran out due to industrial fishing. In response, women from the Heiltsuk First Nation community led grassroots efforts that motivated people to work together and pressured the Canadian government to co-manage fisheries with Indigenous communities. To boost their credibility, Heiltsuk women reclaimed their traditional roles as 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 negotiations, playing important roles in communication, planning, fundraising, networking, and youth engagement. This case shows the importance of women's agency and leadership for just and sustainable aquatic food systems.

Recommendations

Women's empowerment

Efforts should be made to increase women's capacity, agency, and access to resources.

Recommendations include:

- Investing in education to support girls studying science and technology.
- Strengthening access to vocational colleges, mentorship and internship programs.
- Encouraging colleges to develop supports and quotas for women.
- Developing and formalising women's fisheries groups.
- Improving women's financial access.
- Training and supporting women entrepreneurs.
- Developing banking products for women, and helping them to access credit.
- Increasing women's access to equipment.
- Balancing empowerment efforts with the realities of gendered household duties to avoid increasing women's workloads to unsustainable levels.

Gender transformative change

“Gender transformative change” means challenging the root causes of gender inequalities, like norms, roles, perceptions, biases, and policies. Recommendations include:

- Leading discussions that challenge gender norms.
- Working with women and men to develop positive norms.
- Introducing infrastructure to make household duties easier.
- Using women-positive language and images in communication materials to increase women’s visibility.
- Introducing these approaches with technological innovations so that communities can associate gender equality with improved technical outcomes.

Women in fisheries governance

Recommendations at the government level include:

- Building capacity among stakeholders to consider gender when developing policies and choosing which projects to fund.
- Developing or updating strong gender equality policies in relevant ministries.
- Mainstreaming gender into all other policies and programs.
- Encouraging national governments to implement gender equality laws.

Recommendations at the fisheries level include:

- Actively involving women in decision making processes at all levels.
- Ensuring women in leadership positions are able to fully participate in their roles.

Data collection and further research

Women may account for half of the fisheries workforce, but most data don't include them, so it is difficult to measure and understand their roles and impacts. Recommendations include:

- Collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data.
- Researching the how gender equality, women's empowerment, fisheries, food security, and climate change affect each other.
- Studying the environmental impacts of women's inclusion in fisheries management.
- Researching masculinity, men's engagement, and men's vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

Women are less valued, recognized, and paid in fisheries because of structural inequalities and biases. This harms women, their communities, and the environment. By using an aqua ecological approach that combines sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty, these harms can be minimized. Women in fisheries must be empowered and supported, systemic barriers must be challenged, and their roles must be studied. By fully including and supporting women in fisheries, livelihoods, health, equality, and ecology can be improved for all.

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