ADVANCING GENDER IN THE ENVIRONMENT:
GENDER IN FISHERIES—A SEA OF OPPORTUNITIES
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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable fisheries are vital for achieving food security, alleviating poverty, and increasing economic growth around the world. In coastal countries, seafood accounts for up to 70% of protein intake and is an essential source of vitamins, fats, and minerals. At the global level, more than 40 million people are employed as fishers, with an estimated 90% operating at the small-scale. Wild-caught fisheries production reached 90.9 million tons in 2016, and approximately 30% of the world’s marine fisheries are over-fished. Understanding that the fisheries sector offers a vital pathway for development, numerous development agencies and partners, including USAID, work to promote sustainable wild-caught fisheries and conserve marine biodiversity around the world.

Women play a substantial role in the sector, making up nearly half of the overall fisheries sector workforce. Present throughout the value chain, women are found in harvesting, processing, marketing, trading, and leadership roles. However, persistent gender inequalities prevent women from fully participating in economic opportunities and decision making, ultimately restricting the potential of the sector. Additionally, a limited understanding of women’s unique roles and contributions can result in a lack of recognition of their needs and interests in policies and programs, therefore affecting sustainable development outcomes.

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WHY GENDER MATTERS IN FISHERIES

Across the wild-caught fisheries sector, there are three key issues that articulate the scale and potential influence of women in sustainable management as well as the gender-differentiated impacts they can experience:

• Fisheries management is strengthened by addressing gender issues;
• Fisheries are an important entry point and opportunity for women’s economic and social empowerment; and
• Gender-based violence (GBV) is a specific concern in the fisheries sector.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT IS STRENGTHENED BY ADDRESSING GENDER ISSUES

A growing body of evidence suggests that addressing gender issues and integrating women’s empowerment interventions into conservation result in improved governance and ecological results.9,10 The effectiveness of programmatic approaches is improved when women’s roles and perspectives in the sector are better understood. For example, engaging women as stewards for key fishery resources has improved the enforcement of regulations of nearshore ecosystems.11,12 Additionally, increasing women’s access to improved processing technologies has reduced product loss and increased product value, allowing fishing families to realize the same income while catching fewer fish.13,14

FISHERIES ARE AN IMPORTANT ENTRY POINT AND OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN’S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Women are present in the wild-caught fisheries sector in a wide range of roles. The FAO estimates that women comprise 15% of the workforce involved in harvesting and fill 90% of the jobs in fish processing, which includes activities such as canning and gutting. Since women represent a significant part of the fisheries workforce, the sector represents a high-impact opportunity for women’s economic and social empowerment. Evidence shows that interventions to improve women’s entrepreneurial and negotiating skills have strengthened women’s livelihoods through increased income and agency, as well as better social and health outcomes.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) IS A SPECIFIC CONCERN IN THE FISHERIES SECTOR

Though fisheries are an important entry point and opportunity towards advancing gender equality and increasing effective sustainable fisheries management, the sector is still challenged by pervasive inequalities, including GBV. Fisheries programming tends to not include considerations towards the elimination and prevention of GBV, constituting a lost opportunity and potential risk as programming can unintentionally exacerbate vulnerabilities. Worldwide, 35% of women have experienced some type of GBV in their lifetime. In the fisheries sector, structural inequalities and harmful social norms put women and girls in vulnerable situations, where they may be affected by and exposed to violence and abuse. GBV negatively affects the long-term health, well-being, and productive capacity of survivors, creating consequences that extend beyond the survivor to her family and community.

Some fishing communities are also hotspots for HIV/AIDS, with HIV infection rates 4 to 14 times higher than national averages.

19 World Health Organization, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, South African Medical Research Council (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, p.2. For individual country information, see The World’s Women 2015, Trends and Statistics, Chapter 6, Violence against Women, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015 and UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women.
