An Interview with
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and President of the International Organisation for Women in Seafood
Industry (WSI).

You are co-Founder of the International Organisation for Women in Seafood Industry (WSI), launched in January 2017. Tell us about the issues that WSI wants to address.

After an entire career working in this industry, seeing how it functions leaving women aside in many respects, I got together with colleagues to set up WSI, the International Association for Women in the Seafood Industry. WSI's main goals are to highlight the great contribution of women and to raise awareness of the pervasive gender inequalities that characterise this 'male-dominated' industry.

Today, two years later, can you say with confidence that the tide is shifting globally towards a more systematic recognition of gender equality?

Awareness of the lack of recognition of women to this industry and acknowledgment of gender inequalities has indeed begun to grow but in very disparate ways and at varying rates according to companies, institutions and countries.

Putting it another way, there has been some progress in understanding seafood business sustainability not only in its environmental dimension, but also increasingly in its social dimension including decent work and gender equality. However, there is a tendency for companies to prioritise one aspect over the other - gender equality is not at the top of their list.

A new discourse has emerged though. We often hear in conferences and see on social media platforms “very women friendly” declarations. But behind the nice words, real impactful actions are still rare. We hear that the Seafood Sustainability Index to be launched at the end of this year to assess and benchmark the world’s 30 largest seafood companies will include gender criteria. We hear that the WWF-European Union funded Fishforward project plans to develop consumer-targeted informative messages that highlight the fact that more often than not, women have processed the seafood that people buy. The government of Spain has conceived and revealed the “declaration for gender equality in the seafood industry” during the first international congress for women in fisheries. These are feeble, yet positive, indicators signalling that greater attention is being paid to gender. Yet we are still far from the level of public and private commitments needed to achieve real gender equality.

From a WSI perspective, after two years of intense activity we have a keener appreciation of the barriers that exist on the path to gender equity and we can better gauge the extent to which we have to work to level up the consciousness of seafood professionals and the public sector on this issue.

In the recent global survey run by WSI, instances of gender discrimination were reported by seafood professionals and solutions had been suggested. Could you elaborate a little more on the survey and its findings?

Discrimination, unfavourable work conditions for women, deep seated prejudices, unequal access to opportunities, and lower chances of being appointed to executive positions were reported through a set of open and multi-choice questions. Some 56% of respondents admitted that the sector is inequitable with regard to gender; 58% (65% of them women) indicated that gender inequalities are unrecognised or are too sensitive to talk about in their enterprises, while 80% considered that the sector is ‘unattractive’ to women.

Situations of inequality were reported throughout the world. The exception was Scandinavia, where professionals had the
One thing is certain: to champion gender equality, a higher degree of commitment is needed from the authorities, professional organisations and private companies.

What are the ways that men can be part of the discussions on gender equality and how optimistic are you about seeing this happen, particularly in patriarchal societies?

First of all, one of the key results of the survey was that men and women do not share the same observation on this issue. To a majority of men, gender inequality in this business does not exist; or if they had existed, problems have largely been solved, a majority of them believe. By contrast, for the majority of women, the problems remain and worse, are still not recognised. The list of barriers to equality is long, including subconscious discrimination. As Mickael Kimmel, American sociologist says: “When it comes to advancing women in the workplace, one of the biggest hurdles is men's lack of interest. (…) Men can’t see what the issue is. Privilege is invisible to those who have it.” Since men have the power to make things happen (or not), it is a prerequisite to ‘alert’ them. This is one mission of WSI.

This is not only a women's issue but a shared societal concern, where the phenomenon of balancing relationships between the two genders in a progressive environment is at play.

The onus on women to ensure a harmonious work-family balance and the existence of inflexible work practices are said to be among the top barriers in achieving gender equality at work. In many companies, maternity is still seen as a problem that supposedly results in economic losses for companies. This viewpoint on pregnancy and motherhood (re)produces the mechanics of discrimination which end up penalising women.

The non-gender inclusive character of this industry was mentioned by many respondents as well, reinforced by the descriptions of an old-fashioned and male-dominated milieu reported by both men and women. This masculine environment reportedly adds difficulties for women, who are expected to perform according to rules originally made by men for men. These were only a few of the factors presented by the respondents to the survey as barring gender equality. Further, these barriers do not operate in exclusivity; rather, they enhance each other, creating a sort of vicious circle that shapes gender relations among professionals in the seafood industry.

The 700 responses to the survey have helped us to identify three complementary solutions: raising the consciousness of all stakeholders as to what is at stake; engaging men in this progressive conversation; and creating opportunities for such dialogue on gender equality to happen among all stakeholders.

The strongest perception of equality and gender fairness. This outlook is fully coherent with the macro gender inequality index which ranks Denmark, Iceland and Norway at the top of the list of countries closest to full gender equality. This situation is in contrast with the perception in the rest of Europe and North America, where respectively, 63% and 60% respondents of both sexes consider that the industry is not equally attractive and equitable to women compared to men.

The studies you are referring to evidence the positive economic and financial impact in cases where there is high diversity at management levels. Why do we not see this happening more in our industry? Probably because patriarchal norms are so strong that even the prospect of potential benefits does not lead many men to consider opening their realm to women.
In fact, we know that the percentage of female CEOs and the percentage of women board members in the seafood industry are amongst the lowest across all other industries.

Worth noting in the seafood industry is that women are far from absent. On the contrary, representing over 80% of the seafood processing workforce worldwide, they are the backbone of the seafood industry; and yet (to mention only this inequality amongst many other cases) they are underpaid compared to their male counterparts. For instance, in the French fresh fish processing and trading sector, women earn on average 16% less than men. They earn 26% less at management positions, and 10% less at plant level. In this context, we know that equal pay would shrink profits in the short term. Where women represent a cheap source of labour in production (which is the case almost everywhere), raising their wages will impact on competitiveness, unless final consumers are ready to pay the price for equality. We feel that it is time to alert consumers about the real cost of processed seafood.

WSI participated in the 7th Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Conference (GAF7), in which INFOFISH was a partner. Can you tell us what the conclusions were?

GAF conferences are the world’s largest gathering points for social and other scientists working on this topic. WSI felt that it was important to attend GAF7 which was held in Bangkok. We found it to be a very informative and inspiring event where most of the main gender considerations in the seafood industry were tackled. The research community is far more advanced on these questions than private businesses and public organisations. I feel that players dealing with these issues, either in private businesses or public policy management would gain a lot from attending such high quality events as these.

Let me allow Dr Meryl Williams, co-chair at the GAF7 conference, to draw conclusions: “GAF7 was a unique global event jointly organised by the Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section of the Asian Fisheries Society (GAFS), the Asian Institute of Technology and the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia Pacific. It delivered training workshops and handbooks covering essential gender analysis concepts and methods, and insights for improving women’s engagement and rights in aquaculture and fisheries, such as through innovative technologies, collective action and better data. The Conference created a platform for sharing ideas, envisioning a more gender equal future and meeting new and old colleagues for future collaboration. We can trace our pedigree in the continuing series of women/gender and fisheries/aquaculture events back to its initial start in India in 1990, but at GAF7 the theme gained momentum from the wide range of complementary partners such as INFOFISH and WSI. Follow our story and learn more on gender in aquaculture and fisheries on our website http://www.genderaquafish.org/ !"

And ending on a personal note, what do you think would be necessary to make the seafood industry a more gender inclusive and equal environment, one that would offer the same opportunities to young women as men?

We have come so far but this industry is still very traditional and resistance to change is a given. We strongly believe that if leaders, whether from a company or an entire country, were open to embracing gender equality issues, this could prove to the rest of the industry that things could work better. As evidenced in the WSI 2018 survey, this is already the case, for instance in Iceland and Norway. We believe that awareness is the beginning of change, and we must promote the presence of women in this industry by giving them a stronger voice. WSI, on its part, will work at alerting again and again the existence of gender discrimination and at presenting solutions that could alleviate them. We hope that some of you will join us (womeninseafood@wsi-asso.org).

2019 International WSI video competition

One of the WSI’s initiatives is an annual competition for short films that focus on women in the seafood industry. The competition is supported by MATIS, Icelandic institute, by the French Development Agency (AFD) and by the International Association of Fish Inspectors (IAFI). This competition, with a 1000 euros money prize to the winner, is open to all. See details www.womeninseafood.com