

## **Facing the challenges of an uncertain world, women's rights cannot wait**

*It has been 5 years since the International Organisation for Women in the Seafood Industry published its first WATCH report gathering news worldwide on the status, positions, and actions of women along the fisheries and aquaculture value chain. Its main objective is to generate awareness and knowledge to improve understanding of gender inequality in this sector. This year we are pleased to present in commemoration of March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Rights Day the [fourth WSI WATCH recounting all of 2021](#).*

The [first report](#) not only showed the large presence of women contributing to this sector, but also the emergence of new women's leadership and the creation of women's groups on all continents. We see in the [2021 report](#) that after five years these groups have not only multiplied (such as the creation of the South African Network for Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture sector, p. 45) but many have managed to consolidate and strengthen their power for convening and action. Examples of this are the incorporation of Ethiopia and Liberia into the African Women Fish Processors and Trade Network (p.45) and the initiative of the Mulleres Mar de Arousa group for the promotion of an equality observatory for the Galician fisheries sector (p.44).

In 2017, individual stories of women being the first to be able to exercise the role of fisherwomen in their countries or communities were also highlighted. Today, we continue to see first experiences like these multiplying around the world. Setting these precedents is essential to provide future generations with role models and to encourage the evolution of socio-cultural gender norms. This [WSI WATCH](#) also managed to gather news about LGBTQ+ participation in the fisheries and aquaculture sector (p. 39; 71), which represents a tremendous step in the visibility of this group and their contribution in the seafood sector.

### **Gender inequality issue in fisheries and aquaculture has definitely managed to position itself at different levels of action.**

At the association level, we highlight international cooperation and solidarity initiatives such as the creation of the Latin American network of women in artisanal fishing (p. 36) which seeks to generate enriching synergies between women in the fishing and aquaculture industry belonging to different national realities.

At the corporate level, we distinguish fishing companies subscribing to Equality Plans, standards or codes aimed at creating a more inclusive and equitable workplaces. Years ago, [WSI WATCH](#) praised ANFACO company's work in defining its first Equality Plan, an initiative that was recently replicated by Nueva Pescanova in a joint effort with the unions. Having a gender-sensitive corporate policy is not just a matter of counting the number of women, but of understanding the role they play and the factors behind unequal power relations. These equality plans could have a greater impact if they could be projected into local communities in order to raise awareness beyond the workplace. To this end, joint work with local and regional

governments should be generated. Companies are important players in the communities and should be involved - within their CSR policies - in building a life free of violence, ensuring equal opportunities, and promoting equality between men and women.

Finally, at the governmental level, we note that Costa Rica is making efforts to incorporate into its national legislation the guidelines for sustainable, equitable and socially responsible artisanal fishing (FAO SSF Guidelines), to be soon imitated by Ecuador (p.30) and Peru. Chile, for its part, made progress in the legislation of a gender equality policy for artisanal fisheries (p.30). Spain, which has positioned itself as a major reference in this topic, has already assessed the Gender Equality Plan in the Fisheries and Aquaculture sector for the period 2015-2020, which is part of the strategic plan for equal opportunities of the Spanish government (p.43).

We wish to draw particular attention to three articles from [WSI WATCH 2021](#) that we consider are key to understand and learn about the situation of women and gender inequality.

1) *Recognizing IUU women in the IUU problem*: the fishing industry has abundantly discussed the IUU problem, highlighting among its social dimensions the phenomena of human trafficking and slavery of men on boats. A Plan International report (p.12) shows the impacts of this phenomenon from a gender perspective, which makes the effects of this phenomenon on women and their families visible.

2) *Disguised sexism*: another interesting article refers to the creation of the Philippine women's group "Sea Angels" (p.15), who in their role as coast guards must prevent the entry of foreign ships into Philippine waters. This, which could be considered a progress as these women are incorporated into a new unusual space and occupation, contains characteristics of a sexist gender washing action. This program may not have any consistent impact on gender inequalities and further reinforces gender stereotypes by relying on the assumption that these women's skills such as conflict management or soft-speaking ability are "natural". Let us recall that the literature has shown that the essentialization of women's qualities has repercussions on their salary since their competencies are less recognized and therefore their role is economically less valued.

3) *Inequalities in developed countries*: finally, we are pleased for Norway's interest in understanding the reasons for the low participation of women in their fishing sector (p.20). The report concludes that increasing the proportion of women in the sector requires a change in the prevailing macho culture. This resonates with the conclusions of the [2018 WSI survey](#) where we pointed to the vicious circle behind the reproduction of inequalities: it is not possible to deal with one isolated aspect to generate change; we should rather tackle different fronts at the same time. This report is important because Norway is one of the most advanced countries in terms of gender equality; proof of this is its concern to continue working on this issue by requesting this study. Secondly, it shows that this problem is a reality in northern countries and not only in southern countries as many white men from developed countries tend to think.

Unfortunately, there have not only been elements of progress for women. We witness a continuous adverse reality in the industry. The articles in this WATCH show how women in this sector continue to suffer various types of violence such as sexual harassment, exclusion from working on board vessels as fisherwomen and inspectors, and they occupy the most precarious and least recognized jobs. The lack of recognition of their roles is still an issue very much alive. **There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of women's visibility for better fisheries governance. The fight against abuses of women's rights both on the high seas and on land must be permanent and is the responsibility of all of us.**

Despite this, we are seeing more participation of women in areas such as aquaculture. We note how many women have not waited for the enactment of laws or cultural changes to take a place in this industry despite sexism. They are convinced of their capabilities and contributions as major sources of welfare and not as a "help" to the work of fishermen. In turn, many women from rural communities in Southern countries play an active role in the protection and recovery of marine resources, often facing unequal forces against powerful industries in the dispute over land/sea [over]use. However, we must not place on women alone the responsibility for changing the unequal situation they experience. We must look at the factors that determine that these women have the resources and roles they have in order to understand the consequences of this sexual division of labor in terms of gender equality.

By exposing the life stories of these women, [WSI WATCH](#) aims to be a tool to help reverse the stigma of victimhood by portraying their trajectories, by claiming their contribution to the fisheries and aquaculture sector through their different but simultaneous roles in both the productive and reproductive spheres. We should not be satisfied with reviewing individual cases of successful or exemplary women - although we celebrate them! - to say that all is going well in this sector. The problem with exceptions is that they overshadow the others. **Individuals' successes should not overshadow systemic impediments for collective achievements. We recommend going beyond the question of merit - as an indicator of success - and wonder about the women who are still struggling every day, those who are on the field and not in the media.** As a seafood community, we cannot focus only on those who are doing well, but also on all those who have not yet succeeded. And precisely because this coexists with global threats such as the covid-19 pandemic, climate change, globalization, and fisheries mismanagement, among other challenges, we must remain vigilant.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote: *Never forget that it only takes a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your life.* That is precisely WSI's role.

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