

# Women and Labour in Fisheries 101

**Recognising the lack of clarity and therefore consensus on basic terminology, this article attempts to define some common terms used in discussions around gender and labour in fisheries**

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**T**owards a common understanding on gender and labour in fisheries, we define some basic terms commonly used when applying a gender lens to activities in fish value chains, fisheries statistics, policies, and interventions. These definitions recognise the work that women do in fisheries and may help responsible parties create opportunities, address needs and reduce and/or eliminate workplace vulnerabilities.

Let us begin with labour and terms commonly associated with labour.

**Labour** is the physical, mental, and social effort used to produce goods and services. It can also refer to those who work to produce goods and services, such as women, men, and other gender group categories.

**Fair labour, just work and decent work** refer to activities and initiatives that promote better working conditions for all people working in all nodes of the fisheries value chain, including addressing gender differentiated needs.

An **entrepreneur** is a person who, in producing goods and services, is prepared to lose money in order to make a profit.

**Equitable** means fair and reasonable treatment, according to the respective needs of women and men and other groups. This may include equal treatment, or treatment that is different but equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities – leading to substantive equality.

**Inclusive** refers to not excluding anyone who is involved in a fisheries activity and providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who could be marginalised.

Next, consider the various types of labour in fisheries and aquaculture.

A **value chain** is the whole set of activities, connections, and dealings taking place to transform a product and deliver it to consumers. Value chain is preferred to **supply chain** because the latter refers specifically to the steps in getting the product to the customer and not to the processes and relationships that add value to the

product along the way. Value chain activities are often grouped into major **nodes**, namely pre-production, production, post-harvest, trading and consumption.

We consider labour along the **whole of the value chain**, whereas many fisheries agencies focus on, and collect statistics for, just the production node (fishing and fish farming), ignoring the other labour which typically engages more people than that in the production node.

We also take a broad view of labour, including productive and reproductive labour.

**Productive labour** results in goods or services that have monetary value or the equivalent of it. This could be done by the employed, self-employed or even unemployed (informal sector or subsistence). This could also be paid, partly paid or underpaid, or even unpaid.

**Reproductive labour** involves anything that people have to do for themselves (associated with responsibilities of family care and household tasks), including community management and social activities. This includes birthing and raising children, household duties, caring for the elderly, community care, environmental care such as mangrove replanting and nurturing, and coastal clean-ups. These are mainly unpaid.

Who provides the labour in fisheries?

Many workers in small-scale fisheries businesses are **self-employed**. However, as operations grow in size, intensity and complexity, more workers may be hired, unless businesses opt for mechanisation, thereby reducing labour demand.

In both small-scale and larger businesses, the **local community** is one of the main sources of labour, wherein the local hires live in the same area as their workplaces. Some multinational companies even locate factories near sources of local labour.

**Domestic and internal migrants** who come from the host country but whose homes are outside the area of the workplaces also provide labour. Work such as fish processing factory jobs,

attracts people from poorer areas with fewer economic opportunities. For example, Thais from rural and poor farming areas come for factory work near cities, e.g., the Samut Sakhon fish processing areas near Bangkok. In India and Bangladeshi seafood processing factories, young women workers come from other states (India) or districts (Bangladesh).

Another source is **cross-border migrants** or **foreign workers**. These could be long-term legal workers, or itinerant, illegal or irregular workers.

The 2018 International Labour Organization (ILO)-European Union (EU) study of migrants in the seafood industry in Thailand (Ship To Shore Rights Project) reported that in 2017, out of the 600,000 workers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors, 302,000 were registered migrant workers. The number of unregistered migrants was not known. A survey of 434 workers found that 73 per cent of men and only 48 per cent of women received the minimum wage or more. Unregistered workers would be even less likely to receive the minimum wage.

All people migrating to work, whether internally or across borders, suffer social and

cultural dislocations, having to live away from their usual households and communities, often in shared accommodation associated with work. These dislocations are also highly gendered in their impacts.

Recent statistics on how many people work in fisheries were reported by FAO's 'State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020 Report' and the 'Hidden Harvests Report 2012' (HH). FAO and HH reported that 116 million (or 97 per cent) of the 120 million fisheries workers were in developing countries. Of these, more than 90 per cent work in small-scale fisheries, 47 per cent of this workforce consists of women and 73 per cent of fishers and fishworkers live in Asia.

The poor state of global and national gender-disaggregated data has been recognised, including the lack of data on how women and men are involved along the fishery value chains. Furthermore, the existing statistics refer only to paid labour.

In November 2021, experts working on FAO's Illuminating Hidden Harvest (IHH) for Small-Scale Fisheries project provided an update of the HH study, reporting that 113 million

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Fisherwomen at work. Work such as fish processing factory jobs, attracts people from poorer areas with fewer economic opportunities. Thais from rural and poor farming areas come for factory work near cities

people work in small-scale and subsistence fisheries globally, of which 45 million or 40 per cent are women (paid or unpaid). Furthermore, women comprise 15 percent of workers in the pre-harvest node (gear fabrication/repair, boat building), 19 per cent in commercial harvest (vessel and non-vessel based work), and 50 per cent in post-harvest (processing, transporting, trading, selling and related activities). Women also represent 45 per cent in subsistence fishing. Women are underreported in informal and unpaid activities, including in subsistence fishing such as gleaning or foot fishing and other informal activities that support fisheries businesses and operations.

The term **gender divisions of labour** or GDL, refers to how work is assigned or divided according to the gender of the workers. Some GDL are strong in fisheries. GDL can result in inequality and may facilitate or allow for unequal treatment, disparity in wages and opportunities for advancement.

GDL may arise from several, not mutually exclusive, causes.

**Social norms** may prescribe or proscribe what work women and men should do. These include gender stereotypes and gender prohibitions (taboos) for certain jobs. For instance, women are not allowed on fishing boats because this is considered bad luck, or only women are responsible for household chores and childcare, which leads to a double burden for women who also work outside the household.

**Stereotypes** may be based on gender and also on race, age, physical features and capacities, leading to multiple sources of disadvantage and discrimination. In some societies, specifications of skill (skilled or unskilled) and educational levels could determine the level of job one is given.

Women's work is often valued at less than that of men, even if it is the same type. When the work done by women differs from that done by men, **labour cost structures** often result in women workers getting the lower paying jobs. For example, a 2017 ILO survey of seafood migrant workers in Thailand found that men were paid USD 25 more than women each month, on average. Gender differences in labour pay rates, therefore, may be due to women and men performing different types of work or receiving different pay rates for the same work, or both.

**Competing productive and reproductive work** creates stresses. Often, women are expected to bear the load of care, volunteer for community activities, and at the same time

conduct productive work. Large reproductive workloads can greatly diminish the time available to conduct productive work.

**Structural work factors**, such as work schedules and flexibility in arrangements may also be gendered. Women are often at a disadvantage and could miss out on opportunities due to perceptions that they should not work at night, or when they get married or pregnant. Women lose opportunities to do the jobs they prefer or are trained for when these issues affect decisions of employers.

Clearly, labour policies and institutions have a vital role to play in correcting gender asymmetries.

At every level of governance from the international to the local, agencies work on labour matters, develop guidelines, provide resources such as funding, convene meetings and dialogues, and enforce laws. These tasks focus mainly on paid labour, and not all are gender sensitive or responsive.

At the international level, ILO is the main agency working on labour. ILO works with tripartite constituents, from national to international – ministries of labour, workers, and employers' organisations. Other organizations to some extent include the FAO, the International Maritime Organization, the International Organisation for Migration, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development.

Nationally, fisheries labour is the responsibility of the departments of labour and social welfare, whereas other agencies (fisheries, women and children, and law enforcement) may be called to collaborate.

Some NGOs, labour and trade unions, workers' representatives, charities and religious organisations provide support to seafarers and fish workers, and often are their voices to the world.

The private sector has business representative bodies, from small-scale workers, for example, the Self-Employed Women's Association (India), to big business groups, for example, Seafood Business for Ocean Stewardship, as well as certification bodies.

Collaboration and coordination work on fisheries labour among these agencies and groups varies from country to country. ❏