



LATIN AMERICA

# WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN LATIN AMERICA

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## Abstract

Latin American governments are not sufficiently aware of the problems of women in fisheries. Therefore, they have not invested sufficient human or financial resources to respond to the needs of women in fisheries. In cases where investments have been made, they have been inadequate. With a few exceptions, most Latin American countries do not have adequate data and information about the situation of women in fisheries. There is some information about women's role in the sector, their psychological profile, and life conditions, but there is a lack of information on women's participation, needs and expectations in the sector.

Besides domestic work, women are traditionally involved in fishing and aquaculture activities. Women lack access to technical training and training in microenterprises and community organizations, even in countries with experience in these areas. Women in fishing communities also lack access to credit or to co-financing systems for running their activities.

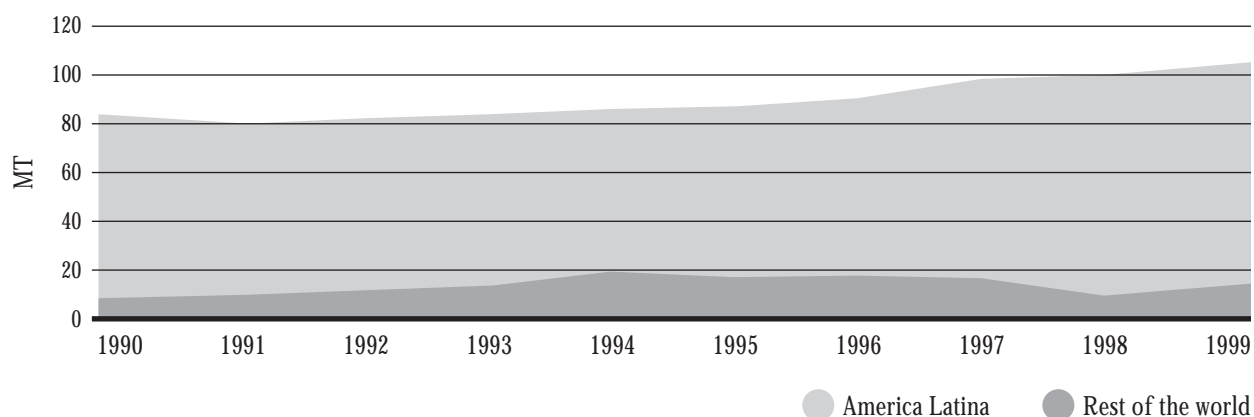
Women are more involved in seafood processing, marketing, and aquaculture, compared to capture fisheries. They also work at the artisanal level, frequently without any remuneration. However, women are gradually occupying spaces and roles that were historically occupied by men.

## Introduction

Fish is the world's largest wild food harvest and provides a vital source of protein as well as cash income for many families in the developing world. An estimate of 120 million people throughout the world depend on fish for all or part of their income.

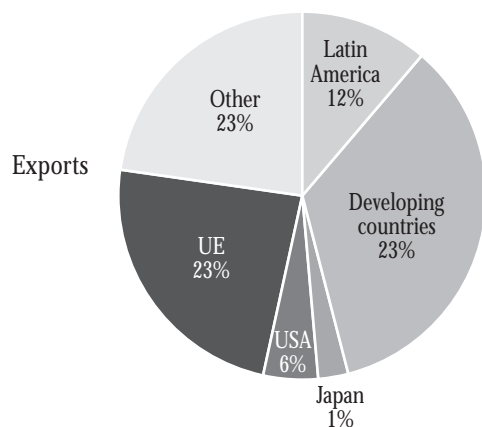
With a total coastline of over 30,000 km and the biggest world reserve of fresh water, Latin America is responsible for 25% of world fisheries production. The production potential of the continent however is still far from being fully exploited (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Latin America production versus rest of the world production

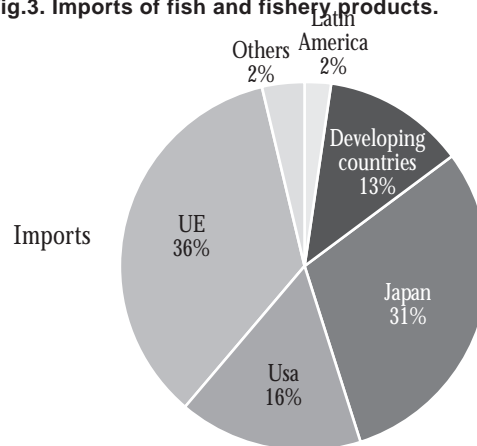


A major part of the processed products is exported. As the largest markets for seafood are the European Union, the United States of America and Japan, there is a strong demand for increased quality in seafood processing, particularly through the adoption of the HACCP quality control method. In Figures 2 and 3, the breakdown and percentages of Latin America's exports and imports of fishery products are presented.

**Fig 2. Exports of fish and fishery products**



**Fig.3. Imports of fish and fishery products.**



## Women's Role in Fisheries in Latin America

In the last 20 years, the issue of women in fisheries has become increasingly important, particularly following the first three World Conferences on Women; the International Women's Year, Mexico City, Mexico, 1975; Copenhagen, Denmark, 1980; and Nairobi, Kenya, 1985. The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 and the World Food Summit, in Rome in 1996 created greater awareness of women's issues. The Beijing FWCW highlighted the need to promote the status of women, and to implement gender-sensitive economic policies and programmes targeting poor women. The World Food Summit stressed the central role of women in food security, and the need to ensure their rights to productive resources and equal opportunities.

In general, the role of women in the fishery sector is perceived to be one in which they wait passively for their husbands to return from the sea after their working days. In fact, women play an active role in all levels of the fishery productive chain—from catches, seeding and harvest in aquaculture, to processing and marketing.

Women also work in private and public organizations, carrying out activities like inspection, quality control, reporting of statistical data, teaching, and conducting research.

Some of the obstacles to the participation of women in fisheries stem from social taboos and myths which state that women bring bad luck, or the fact that women are physically less strong than men. As a consequence, women generally earn a lower income than men for the same job. They also face difficulties in obtaining loans from financial institutions. In addition, training and extension programs generally tend to focus on the needs and interests of men.

Women's involvement in fisheries is only now being recognized. Most Latin American countries do not have adequate data and information about the situation of women in fisheries. There is some information about women's role in the sector and their life conditions, but there is insufficient data about their participation, needs and expectations in the sector.

Due to the above situation, the work of INFOPECSA aims to ensure that women's role is fully recognised in the Latin American fishery sector so that support is provided for women's activities, economic and

human needs. For this purpose the Network of Latin American Women of the Fishery Sector was formed and promoted.

Currently, the network has more than 300 members from 20 countries, including countries of other regions like Spain and Mozambique.

The objectives of the network are

1. to identify the need of women in fisheries;
2. to provide information and training that facilitates the participation of women in the sectors (new available technologies, sanitation aspects, research and advances in the sector);
3. to detect, support and guide cooperation sources (financing sources);
4. to congregate, support, and provide incentives for the creation of local networks which will work directly and in collaboration with the Network.

The First Meeting of Focal Points of The Network of Latin American Women of the Fishery Sector was held from 5 to 6 October 2000 in Montevideo, Uruguay. The event was jointly organized by INFOPECA and FAO, with the main purpose of analyzing the situation of Latin American women and their role in the fishery sector.

Twenty-eight persons from ten countries of the region participated in this event: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Each focal point was requested to prepare a report with the following information:

- Statistical data available: Total of workers in the sector disaggregated by sex, type of task (aquaculture, fisheries), and age;
- Type of activities that women carry out in the local fisheries;
- The main problems women in this sector face: sanitary, economic, social, training etc;
- Evaluation of strengths and weaknesses;
- Organizations with aid programs for gender and fishery;
- Activities carried out in the national fishery sector;
- Projects on gender (not only fish) in the industrial and rural areas;
- The needs of women in the fishery sector.

## Main Activities

The main activities women in Latin America are involved in include:

**Fish factory work:** In processing companies, women are involved in filleting, selection of raw materials, classification of species, gutting, heading, labeling, packing and cleaning in general. These are all activities that require meticulous revision and are handled by smaller hands. In some cases, companies that do not work all year round keep the most efficient women for the tasks of cleaning and maintenance. When the season restarts, these women are dedicated to supervising and training new fish workers.

**Self-employed work:** The self-employed workers are women bound directly (fish factory workers) or indirectly (fishers' wives/daughters/sisters) to the fishery sector. They try to vary their products by preparing and selling preserved fish paste and cakes, dried, salted or smoked fish. This is a growing sector due to high unemployment in many countries. It is a heterogeneous sector that employs women from different groups within the sector and also from other social sectors.

Artisanal fishery: A woman linked to an artisanal fishing community is generally the wife of a small-scale fisher and she plays a relatively passive role. She is involved in performing skilled and time-consuming jobs on-shore, such as net making and mending, catch, processing and marketing. Frequently, she and her children wade and glean the shores for shellfish, and they also collect seaweed. The nature of her work is seasonal. Her work is near her family and home but far away from urban centers. Her work is passed on to future generations of women.

Artisanal fishers have low economic and educational level. They learn their job through family tradition. They begin to work between the ages of 13-15 years, and many of them abandon school to contribute to the family income. They do not have a sense of ownership, nor a culture of saving. When they return home, they take rest or have a good time, while the women prepare the fishery products for sale on the beach, at the markets or to wholesalers.

These working conditions imply a high level of daily commitment. It should be highlighted that artisanal fishery involves daily work throughout the year, which shows the importance of women's contribution in the organization of the family.

Aquaculture: The main activities of women in small-scale aquaculture are feeding, harvesting and processing. They also sell fish products.

Fishing: Women do not go fishing at sea. It is however common and less dangerous to see them engaged in inland fishing (lagoons, rivers), where they use small boats and canoes.

Marketing of fish and fishery products: At the landing sites, there is an increasing trend in women selling their own catch (if they are working independently) or the catch of their husbands. Many women sell fishery products in markets and supermarkets.

Quality assurance: Approximately 75% of the technicians involved in quality assurance are women. The main professions involved in quality control are veterinarians, biologists, chemists and fishing engineers.

Fish and fishery products inspection: Twenty percent of the fish inspectors are women (veterinarians in general).

Research and development of new products: Fifty-five percent of the researchers are women. They are generally biologists, veterinarians, chemists, engineers and economists.

Management and administrative activities: At present, there is a general tendency for women to work in different fields in the public and private sectors. There are numerous women working as managers, executives and directors.

The fact that women carry out productive activities besides household activities, allows them to obtain economic revenues and to contribute to improving their families' quality of life.

## Groups of Social Contention

Most of the women in fishing communities do not belong to any social group eg. church or sport clubs, because they do not have the time. In some Latin American countries, the proliferation of Christian groups and the action of the Catholic Church have helped to reduce levels of alcoholism and drug addiction. However, these problems still occur due to the low educational level, the early initiation into active sexual life, and women's traditional tolerance of their husbands' polygamous relationships.

## Organizations with Gender Programs

Generally, organizations that run gender programs in Latin America are not involved in the issue of women in fisheries. These groups are involved in the areas of training, sanitation, and health, especially in the area of birth control.

## Strengths and Weaknesses

Women are often recognized for their multi-tasking roles. Women play the roles of workers as well as housewives. This means that they have to assume responsibilities both for their households and work places. They have to look for ways to satisfy the needs of their children and other members of their families. This condition makes women very receptive to training activities.

### Strengths

- Women are not only associated with assistance programs, they participate actively in fishing and aquaculture.
- Women are skilled in tasks like handling and packing of fishery products.
- Women are capable in work like quality assurance, and the development of new products.

### Weaknesses

- Discrimination against women in some Latin American countries undermines the roles women play.
- Despite the existence of women-friendly laws and policies, women remain discriminated against as the levels of awareness of these laws and policies are low. Women still lack access to information on health and reproductive health resulting in unstable relationships, unwanted pregnancies, etc.

## Needs

Latin American women's training needs include

- Technical aspects: technology, manipulation, preservation, quality control and marketing.
- Social aspects: legislation, reproductive health, family planning.
- Micro-enterprise aspects: Creation and management of small companies and cooperatives.

Women are currently being trained more as fish plant workers. This situation is due to the execution and implementation of international sanitary regulations, as described under the HACCP. A high percentage of women have expectations to be trained to improve their participation in fishery activities, in order to earn a better income. Other needs of Latin American women include childcare and caring for older members of the family when they are outside the home.

## Problems

Women who work in fish plants experience occupational health problems, related to humidity, colds, and standing for long periods of time while doing repetitive operations. It should be noted that such occupational health hazards of the fishery industry also affect women who work in other manufacturing sectors. Men in this sector are equally affected.

At the artisanal level, women are not remunerated for the work that they do as women's work in this sector is considered as marginal to that of their husband's. This pushes women out of the social security system.

## Conclusions

Latin American governments are not sufficiently aware of the problems women face in the fisheries sector. Consequently, they have not invested enough human nor financial resources to assist in meeting women's needs. In cases where there has been some investment, it has been inadequate.

With a few exceptions, there is generally a lack of data on women in fisheries in most Latin American countries. There is some information about women's role in the sector, their psychological profile and their life conditions, but there is insufficient data about women's participation, their needs, and expectations in the sector.

Besides domestic work, women have been involved in fishing and aquaculture activities based on family tradition. Their access to training activities in the technical aspects, microenterprises and community organization is limited, even in countries with experience in this area.

Latin American women are predominantly involved in seafood processing, seafood marketing, and aquaculture; while minimally involved in capture fisheries. They also work at the artisanal level (frequently without any remuneration) as well as at the industrial level. Gradually, women are occupying spaces and roles that were historically occupied by men.

In most countries, women in fisheries or aquaculture communities lack access to credit or co-financing systems for running their activities.

## Recommendations

The actions recommended by the Network to Latin American governments are the following:

1. To prepare an integrated study on women's needs in fisheries from technical, socioeconomic and microenterprise aspects. This study should include qualitative and quantitative data for the purpose of defining the action fronts and the priorities of the countries.
2. To formulate a medium term action plan to execute work directed at improving working conditions, diversification possibilities and life conditions of women in the fishery sector.
3. To undertake training activities for small-scale fisherwomen, aquaculturists, plant workers and wives of fishers on specific areas for the improvement of their capacity.
4. To identify and promote credit lines and other loan systems and to target these at poor women involved in fisheries.

As actions and self-commitment for the Network, the participants recommended:

1. A consolidation of the local networks through focal points in each country.
2. The sharing of the activities and work already prepared for this First Latin American Meeting of Focal Points, as well as other information useful to the network.
3. The establishment of a permanent communication system among the members of the Network through electronic mail, and to encourage the active participation of all members.
4. The collection of data on the situation of women in fisheries and the socioeconomic analysis of the countries in the region.
5. The lobbying of interest and commitment from national governments of the region for women in the fisheries.
6. The collection of publications, existing legislations, photographs and any other documents regarding Latin American women in general, and women of the fisheries sector in particular, in order to build up an information base for the network.

## Bibliography

Informe final de la Primera Reunion de Puntos Focales de la Red Latinoamericana de las mujeres del sector pesquero - acuicola. 5-6 de octubre del 2000, Montevideo, Uruguay.