

## Exploring Gender in Caribbean Fisheries

### Exploración de Género en la Pesca del Caribe

### Exploration de Genre dans la Pêche des Caraïbes

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#### ABSTRACT

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is a geo-political body with a membership of fifteen small island developing states. Most of these countries are English-speaking and heavily dependent on the marine resources of the Caribbean Sea for tourism and fisheries. While tourism is the most important economic sector in many countries, fisheries typically rank near the least economically important according to official statistics. It is argued that these statistics do not appropriately or accurately measure the real contribution of fisheries to social, economic and cultural assets and incomes of CARICOM states. In such arguments, and in the official statistics, gender is customarily ignored. Although sex disaggregated fisheries statistics are scarce, it is clear that men dominate the harvest sector labour force of CARICOM fisheries while women dominate landing site fish vending and as labour in fish processing plants. Most CARICOM fisheries are small scale, but semi-industrial and industrial fisheries exist. Big investors in fisheries are mainly men in both harvest and postharvest, but there is evidence that investment by women is underestimated. Female fisheries officers, fisherfolk leaders, researchers, and NGO staff are often as common as men. Yet gender in Caribbean fisheries is poorly documented and gender is not considered in regional and national fisheries decision-making. The newly established Gender In Fisheries Team (GIFT) provides data and information that address the above with perspectives on gender mainly from Caribbean fisherfolk leaders.

KEYWORDS: Caribbean, fisheries, gender

#### INTRODUCTION

Gender has not been a high priority topic in Caribbean fisheries management, neither in conservation nor development. Compared to other areas of the world, the gender characteristics of Caribbean small-scale fisheries are poorly documented. Caribbean fisheries decision-makers routinely make assumptions about gender based mainly on their own observations, not systematic gender analysis. As fisheries increasingly employ ecosystem approaches and more meaningful participatory methods (Cox and McConney 2012) it will become even more critical to achieve a better, evidence-based understanding of gender.

The regional Gender in Fisheries Team (GIFT), led by the University of the West Indies Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (UWI-CERMES), has started to conduct applied interdisciplinary research and outreach to better understand gender and assist with policy and practice concerning gender in Caribbean small-scale fisheries. GIFT focuses on the implementation of the gender provisions in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) in the countries of Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) and Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CFNO). GIFT is conducting a preliminary scoping study of gender in Caribbean small-scale fisheries. This short communication highlights some emerging findings.

#### METHODS

The images of gender in Caribbean fisheries in the poster from which this short communication is derived primarily come from secondary data collection: sex disaggregated data, photographs, articles (published and unpublished), oral histories, and other information relevant to gender in the context of the SSF Guidelines in CRFM countries and fisheries. The scoping examined regional and national policy documents, global reports, census data, meeting reports and consultations documents. There was limited primary data collection through unstructured and semi-structured interviews and observation. An intern conducted most of the research with fisherfolk and other key informants and advisers assisting with the interpretation of findings.

Three main conceptual frameworks inform GIFT approaches and methods. These frameworks address livelihoods, adaptive capacity and institutions. The scoping focused on the sexual division of labour and livelihoods along the fisheries value chain. It also paid attention to adaptive capacity in the form of the livelihood assets that fisherfolk had, or had access to via various means. The main institutions examined were those of collective action that brought fisherfolk together to establish formal organizations. Fisheries authorities comprised another set of institutional arrangements investigated in scoping.

Our geographic scope is the set of 17 countries and territories that comprise the CRFM, which includes the 15 members of CARICOM. Currently this excludes Spanish and French speaking locations with the exception of Haiti. Since most gender statistics refer to CARICOM, not CRFM, as the geo-political unit of reporting we often refer to both. In most cases, they are interchangeable for the purpose of this study. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in Barbados, where the intern

was based. Mainly women were interviewed to discover how they managed their income earning activities along with domestic duties. Public officers provided information on the male to female staffing ratios in fisheries-related departments. The Barbados National Union of Fisherfolk Organisations (BARNUFO) offered sex disaggregated data on the participation in fisherfolk training courses. However, for the examples in the poster a broader brush picture of the region was portrayed to bring out some key themes rather than the details.

This broad-brush approach was also necessary in part due to a deficiency in our methods. This weakness was the inability, in many cases, to adequately triangulate our findings in order to improve confidence in their validity and reliability. When we obtained information from interviews we often could not confirm this evidence by access to verifiable data in documents or from direct observation. Similarly, secondary data and statements in statistics and reports could not easily be conformed by questioning sufficient people to be sure that the data and their interpretation were likely to be correct.

Triangulation was difficult mainly due to the absence of, or challenges in access to, sex disaggregated data in the first place. For example, unless there were fields for 'male' and 'female' on official fisheries authority forms we had to rely on other clues such as fully spelled out first names to determine the sex ratios in some data sets of fishers, boat owners, public workers, trainees and so on. Besides being prohibitively laborious, given our scarce and voluntary research assistance, this name investigation was flawed as not all names were spelled out, and names are more difficult to clearly assign to sex by convention these days. Unless there was other evidence or direct knowledge of the person the data set became useless for sex disaggregated gender analysis. Where sufficiently clean sex disaggregated data sets were available, our human resources were at times insufficient to complete the gender analysis such as determining the reasons behind female boat ownership, as it may be the women become owners due mainly to partnerships, inheritance and reasons other than their investment choice.

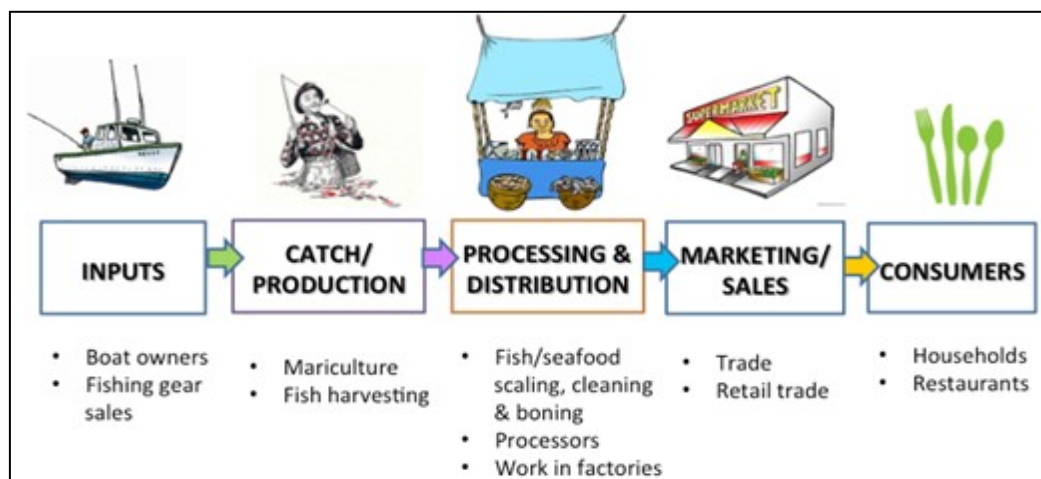
Given the above and other shortcomings, we resorted to presenting general findings and observations that we thought were fairly common knowledge but were worth deeper gender analysis in future scoping or directed research. While we may think that the underlying reasons behind gendered patterns are obvious, this is assumption is not necessarily correct.

## RESULTS

Findings related to livelihoods, adaptive capacity, and institutions are presented. They do not derive from detailed gender analysis that utilizes the conceptual frameworks previously mentioned. Instead, they illustrate some of the abundant common knowledge about gender in Caribbean fisheries that needs to be systematically questioned and probed further if we are to understand gender to the extent expected in the SSF Guidelines and required for the ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF).

### Livelihoods

Ultimately, we intend to attain a gendered understanding of fisheries livelihoods in all of these locations. In this preliminary scoping, however, we only have a few insights backed by research, and much of this comes from Barbados which cannot be taken as representative of the region. Yet it seems uncontested that both women and men will be found distributed in all livelihoods along the longer value chains in the major fisheries of CRFM members (Figure 1). Very short value chains in which fishers with fairly low capital investment sell directly to institutional buyers, such as in some spear fisheries and small lobster and conch dive fisheries, are inevitably going to be heavily male dominated, as is the harvest sector in fisheries worldwide. But as value chains become longer and more complex, women are more evident. From the input end we found women in tackle shops in Jamaica and dispensing diesel fuel in Barbados. If we take habitat, rather than human activity as the start of the value chain, then there are clearly both men and women in the science, conservation initiatives and management measures that address marine ecosystem health.



**Figure 1.** Livelihoods of women and men are diverse along the fisheries value chain.

In Barbados we re-visited previous gender scoping (McConney et al. 2013), re-confirming that female ownership of fishing vessels may be higher than assumed in the absence of data analysis, and that the reasons for this pattern remain unclear as women seem to own the larger vessels but are seldom visible at the dockside conducting transactions. We were told that very similar patterns exist elsewhere. Women told us that they were not welcomed, in many cases, as regular crew even if they thought that they had proved their worth in productivity and were willing to go to sea. They said that the excuses offered by men for barring them were vague. Eliminating culturally determined constraints such as taboo or religion, common in other parts of the world, this behaviour requires investigation in order to understand the reproduction of male dominance in the harvest sector.

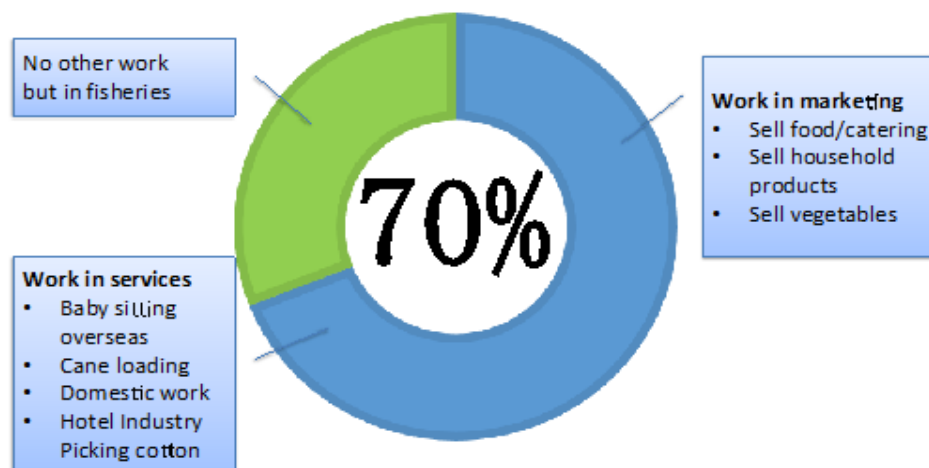
While postharvest is the reverse, being female dominated, from labour force numbers to price-setting, we were told that men are taking up work that was previously done by women. Sometimes this had a strong signal of seasonality or opportunism that was different from the patterns of women. In Barbados this applied especially to fairly low-skilled, easy-entry and easy-exit jobs such as cleaning fish that was attracting young men seeking quick income. The drivers of this trend were uncertain. Speculation ranged from the increasing use of illegal drugs to the decline in average male formal education to the relative scarcity of manual labour jobs in construction and the like that were taken by non-nationals from other CARICOM countries. We do not know whether the reported trends, if they are more than short-term anomalies, are worrisome or not. If male encroachment into female work in fish markets threatens the job market for women in female-headed households, or if male instant-income strategies lead to increased drug and alcohol abuse resulting in more gender-based violence, are queries to be pursued. Except for in Jamaica, we were not told of any aim to make fisheries management planning more livelihoods-based. However, even if this were a general trend, we would ask whether

fisheries authorities are equipped to take on either gender or livelihoods, or them combined. Of course, there are many more questions concerning a gendered analysis of livelihoods than our preliminary scoping could tackle, and we return to some later.

### Adaptive Capacity

The adaptation connection was in our investigation of livelihood assets or capital. We know that both male and female fisherfolk often have other work inside or outside the fishing industry to help make ends meet, especially in the face of strong seasonality as occurs in the harvest of both finfish (e.g. pelagics, aggregating demersals) and invertebrates (e.g. sea urchins, conch, lobster) (Figure 2). While researching in one fishing community we were told that young women typically started working in the fishing industry as their first job experience and returned for short periods to assist households on a kinship basis when fish were particularly plentiful. Young men apparently did not do so to the same extent. We are aware that the types of work available to, and pursued by, women and men differ. Gender analysis needs to go deeper to probe the reasons behind the differences, especially where gendered choice constraints call for more attention to achieving gender equality through mainstreaming.

We were unable to determine how men and women may adapt differently to climate change and variability, but this is clearly a major concern. Given the increasing educational attainment of women compared to men in several Caribbean countries, on the face of it the statistics may favour women being better able to adapt. But this must take into account matters such as age, poverty, health, social networks, institutional barriers, cultural determinants, and other variables. Education and knowledge attained is not the same as that mobilized. Generally, for both men and women, the role of local knowledge in climate change adaptation and disaster risk management is poorly specified in Caribbean fisheries. Informal processes for incorporating local knowledge into



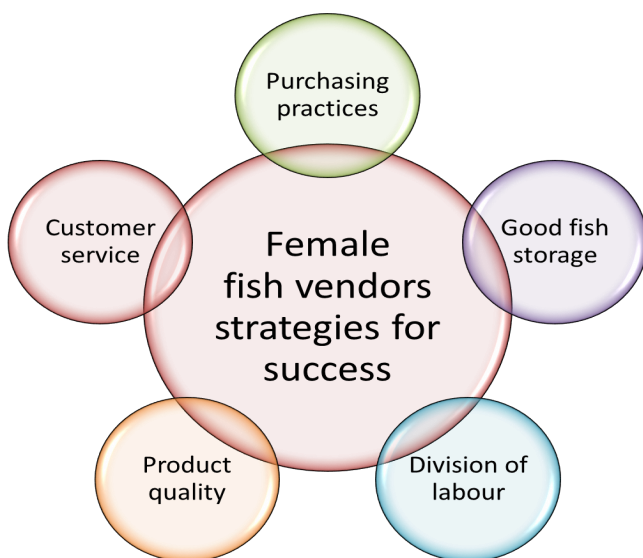
**Figure 2.** Adaptive capacity allowed 70% of fish vendors diversify their livelihoods

fisheries plans are obviously gendered, with men being in the forefront. If there are no attempts to actively seek out women's inputs into adaptation they are likely to remain unrecorded and unused.

There are several other dimensions to adaptive capacity. One that runs throughout fisheries value chains is access to and use of technology from habitat and harvest to cooking and consumption. Having access to, and being able to effectively utilize, technology is likely to confer adaptive advantages. There is more emphasis on information communication and technologies (ICT) in fisheries, but gender seems not to be a variable taken into account. Another dimension of adaptive capacity is policy influence. Several countries have gender policies, but we found that few made any mention of fisheries. It can be said that gender policies and low on the priorities of most CARICOM countries, but these are often tied to poverty assessment. A recent CRFM fisheries poverty assessment called for more attention to gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment (CRFM 2012). Few national fisheries policies and plans are operationalized or explicitly address gender.

### Institutions

Institutions and organizations are the informal and formal arrangements and rules that will enable or constrain gender equality and mainstreaming in fisheries (Figure 3). We have touched on several institutional matters above. However, one of the most interesting is women's representation in policy and other fisheries decision-making within governance structures. Women and men staff CRFM fisheries authorities in fairly equal numbers at all organizational levels it seems, although there were no easily available public sector statistics on this. Despite notable exceptions, such as in Barbados, fisherfolk organizations tend to be male-dominated. Men contend that female fish



**Figure 3.** Formal and informal institutions can enable or constrain livelihood strategies.

vendors exert the most power over fish pricing and the economics of fishing. A gender analysis of the political economy of fisheries in the region was beyond the resources of our scoping, but is urgently needed to understand the institutional economic bases for power and policy influence. One argument often heard is that if women have economic power in fisheries then there is no need for them to also pursue policy influence as money talks. Since political and economic domains often, but do not always, coincide there is merit in investigating this further via gender analysis. Findings could, for example, inform strategies of the CNFO with respect to the components of the CRFM.

Also related to strategies are the explanations needed for the gaps seen in the indicators by which gender issues are assessed to rank countries at the global level. For example, the global 2013 Gender Gap Report has Barbados (World Economic Forum 2013) leading the world in education and health — women are becoming better educated and live longer than men. However the country ranks much lower regarding equality in political empowerment — we need to understand why and know what difference it makes. Since few of the gender metrics available in the CARICOM and CRFM literature and online sources are fisheries-specific, we need to ask which metrics also adequately represent fisheries. For example, while most countries boast high literacy rates it is known from practice that illiteracy remains high among fisherfolk compared to the national statistic. What would be the case for education and health in Barbados considering the fisheries sector? Would women in Barbados still be world leaders among fisherfolk globally? CARICOM has in the past produced a sex-disaggregated profile of the region (CARICOM Secretariat 2003). Knowing if and how the fisheries sector is an outlier in national and regional gender statistics could be very useful.

Another aspect of institutional analysis requiring a gender lens is the approach that should be taken to collaborative management in fisheries. Participatory approaches are now embedded in the SSF Guidelines and EAF. However, the differences in how women and men participate, or would wish to participate, are not taken into account except informally. In few fisheries authorities are there staff that specifically receive gender awareness or more comprehensive training as part of their fisheries career development. Our scoping suggested that issues ranged from the logistics of holding gatherings that women were encouraged and able to attend to more complex issues such as how a gender sensitive approach to fisheries could help inform food security and nutrition from the fishing enterprise to household levels throughout society. Since there is typically little or no interaction between the fisheries authorities and gender units in these countries, the opportunities for information exchange are limited. Hence, for several reasons, fisheries and gender policies, plans and projects seldom cross paths. This divide is not unique to the public sector, however, and it is the fisheries authority that needs to take the initiative to address gender rather than expect the gender unity to embrace fisheries. Our scoping reached this conclusion in agencies as diverse as the UN

system to academia. For example, FAO is much more into gender equality than UN Women is into the fisheries sector. In UWI, it is the life sciences faculties that consider gender more than the gender units consider fisheries. In general, we see a trend for interdisciplinary fisheries scientists to become more gender-sensitive, whereas gender scholars and practitioners have little interest in fisheries, at least in the Caribbean. The GIFT is seeking to address this imbalance.

### DISCUSSION

The results of preliminary scoping shared in the poster and in this short communication constitute merely the tip of a large and formidable iceberg. Gender in Caribbean fisheries is a relatively untouched area of applied academic research as well as practical development intervention. Gender has been neglected. Most fisheries stakeholders take gender relations (power essentially) as being well enough understood through personal experience and observation rather than deserving of detailed gender analysis in the same fashion as other topics in fisheries science and management. In the English-speaking Caribbean it is often said, from projects to policy, that gender “is not a problem” since women are not conspicuously impacted by the harsh inequalities and inequities found in other parts of the world. Women and men involved in Caribbean fisheries are not likely to see gender as a priority for the diversion of scarce resources (whether financial, human, physical or otherwise). Our scoping suggests that these attitudes and perceptions are misplaced and misguided.

In conclusion, although our research has only just begun, we are learning the following about gender in Caribbean fisheries:

- i) The image of gender as being irrelevant to Caribbean fisheries is very false,
- ii) Gender in fisheries is a topic that interests both women and men regionally,
- iii) Fisherfolk strongly support the SSF Guidelines, including gender provisions,
- iv) Gender mainstreaming is not just fashionable, it is good for development,
- v) Not only women, but young men, require special attention in gender study,
- vi) Caribbean fisheries policy, planning and management is largely gender blind,
- vii) Few researchers, fisheries managers and fisherfolk know much about gender,
- viii) Gender in Caribbean fisheries differs from elsewhere in several major aspects,
- ix) Better sex disaggregated data are essential for conducting gender analyses,
- x) Participatory action research is a means of advancing research and advocacy, and
- xi) Gender in fisheries research should be a collaborative effort with fisherfolk.

Over the remaining period that GIFT is exploring its engagement with gender in relation to the implementation of the SSF Guidelines we will continue scoping and providing more comprehensive information on gender in Caribbean fisheries.

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