



# Women in Fisheries



## **Voices from the industry** Policy brief



This guidance has been produced by the Women in Fisheries project, which is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under project reference number ES/R00580X/1.

## Summary


- Women are everywhere in the fishing industry
- There is limited recognition and respect for the contributions women make across the sector
- Fishing is often only defined as that which takes place at sea, limiting the understanding of other significant parts of the industry
- To improve the position of women and encourage them to start working in fisheries, there is a need for government, non-government and industry actors to work together
- As the UK leaves the European Union and the fishing industry is reorganised, the time for change is now.

**Women experience issues around pay, abuse and violence, as well as prejudiced and traditional beliefs. There is a lack of adaptation to women's bodies in the industry and few opportunities for women to start fishing. They often have to juggle fishing work with childcare.**

This briefing summarises the discussions at the first UK women in fisheries meeting held on the 17th of October 2019 in Exeter. It outlines important themes identified in the meeting, which brought together women from across the UK to share experiences, discuss issues and map out a way forward for women in the fishing industry. The meeting was supported by the Women in Fisheries project, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

# Background

Women made up about 15% of the UK's fisheries and aquaculture sector in 2012<sup>1</sup> but we have little information on what these women were doing. Whilst women are in the minority when it comes to working in visible roles on fishing boats<sup>2</sup>, they occupy many direct and invisible roles in fish capture, trading, processing, management, administration, families and communities<sup>3</sup>. Yet women's contributions are often seen as 'help' rather than 'work'<sup>4</sup>.



“Women are not only engaged as visible and paid workers, but also as ‘invisible’ and unpaid workers with a wide range of roles and tasks.

They contribute significantly to the industry, but are under-represented, under-recognised, unpaid or underpaid with little say in decision making at all levels.”<sup>3</sup>

# Women are everywhere

The fishing industry encompasses a vast range of roles, from fish capture and processing, to sales, distribution and marketing, each contributing to putting fish on consumers' tables. Our participants reported that women are present in every part of this supply chain and often also take on direct but unpaid roles within family fishing businesses.



These can include crafts such as mending and making nets; or managing the administration of vessel paperwork, including processing catch records and crew wages. Women (more so than men) are also likely to provide vital family-based support, often earning a supplementary income to balance the ebb and flow of their partner's remuneration.

Women also hold other roles central to the fishing industry, working as fisheries policy and enforcement officers; harbour staff; fisheries officers (e.g. IFCA or MMO); and scientific researchers. Women run fisheries associations, co-ops, producer organisations, and fisheries training companies.

Participants at our meeting were keen to note that women are highly involved in developing the future of the fishing industry. Examples included educating school children and the public about local fish, promoting fish eating, and running cookery courses.

Another important theme identified how women are active in promoting the health and wellbeing, welfare and safety of industry workers. An example mentioned here was the Seafit programme which focuses on fishermen's physical and mental health<sup>5</sup>.

# It's not always easy

Whilst our participants wanted to remain part of the fishing industry, they identified a range of issues related to being a woman in the sector. These range from cultural and traditional prejudices, to unequal pay and violence and abuse.

## Cultural and traditional prejudice

The most discussed theme was the presence of cultural and traditional prejudice against women. Participants agreed this served to exclude women as well as discourage them from entering the industry in the first place. Women reported that superstitious beliefs such as "women are bad luck on boats" still prevail and that men often "don't expect you to be there" and "don't want you to be there", reflecting a barrier to entering the industry. Women working in the industry also often experience disrespect and sexism. They reported their knowledge is devalued by male industry workers, often exemplified through unnecessary "mansplaining". There is also an expectation that women should be confined to performing roles traditionally associated with their gender, such as paperwork. Our participants also felt pressured to 'fit in' within the pre-existing culture, which was often challenging.

## Undervaluing women's work

Women reported they often have lower pay than men working in the fishing industry – if they were paid at all. There is a history of undervaluing the work women have done in the industry and participants stressed that "women have always been involved". In addition to a lack of economic remuneration, women receive little recognition for the work they do.

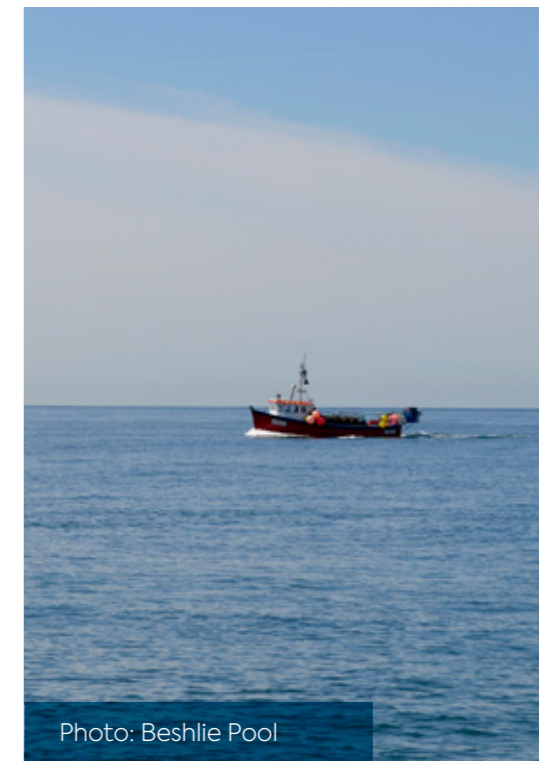


Photo: Beshlie Pool

### **Recruitment challenges and discrimination**

Women who sought to work at sea talked of the challenge to find a boat that would take them on. They experienced a lack of opportunities for women to work at sea and said the current informal system of recruitment was discriminatory towards women. They suggested that a more formal recruitment process with part-time apprenticeship programmes could help to overcome this. Nevertheless, women reported that the fishing industry was most often not adapted to the bodies of women, lacking basic facilities such as toilets. They particularly mentioned bodily experiences such as periods, menopause and pregnancies as challenging and potentially discouraging for women starting a career at sea.

### **Violence and abuse**

Women reported issues around violence in the industry – both at sea and in fishing households. They also suffered bullying at sea and in online forums, making the industry an unappealing place to work in. Women also highlighted issues around sexual violence – both verbal and physical – experienced by women working in the industry.

### **Lack of mentors**

There is a lack of women role models and mentors in the industry which limits the opportunities for women to learn from others' experiences. Our participants suggested that mentorship and support from more established women could help those with little experience to navigate their entry into a fishing career.

### **Childcare issues**

Women reported they struggled juggling working at sea with childcare and minding children. This was an issue that most – but not all – men are spared from.

## **Solutions and the way forward**

We identified five ways to improve the situation of women in the fishing industry. Participants felt strongly that now was the time for change, as the UK's exit from the EU presents opportunities to rethink domestic fishing policy.

### **Promotion of women**

Participants agreed that some of the issues identified would be solved by simply increasing the number of women in fishing. Promoting women to join the industry in a similar way to armed forces recruitment, could present fishing as a viable career option to women.

### **Value fisheries work differently**

By better recognising the different roles needed to bring fish from the ocean to people's plates, participants felt women's contribution to the fishing industry would become more visible; they should be counted in official statistics. Participants also noted the need to value the unpaid work women do as part of the industry – often behind the scenes.

### **Imagining a different fishery**

Women in the meeting expressed a desire to change traditional

working conditions and patterns, particularly at sea. They wanted to improve the general work-life balance of fisheries employment, which needs to be considered in the design of fishing policies. Participants also expressed a desire to increase the sustainability of fishing for both humans and fish.

### **Recruitment – remove hurdles and mentorship**

In order to become fishers, women must have access to work experience on boats. One way to achieve this would be to formalise recruitment practices by establishing apprenticeship programmes for women in the industry, helping to overcome current discrimination and disadvantages. Women should also have opportunities for mentorship by more experienced women, providing advice on how to navigate some of the gender-based challenges often faced when entering the industry.

## **Organise and network**

Women's voices in the UK fishing industry have traditionally not been expressed or listened to. Going forward, there is a need for industry, government and non-governmental actors to work together – and to include women in fisheries in meetings, processes and policymaking. Specifically, our participants highlighted the need to include women in fisheries in the UK maritime strategy, which seeks to promote women and diversity within the sector.

To take the first steps in this direction, women at the meeting established the UK Women in Fisheries network. To follow or join the network, visit:

**[women-fisheries.com/network](https://women-fisheries.com/network)** 

Our discussions have highlighted the various and vital roles that women play in the fishing industry and shed light on some of the gender-related challenges they face daily. We call for a joint effort in improving the position and recognition of women in the UK fishing industry, an effort which should coincide with post-Brexit reorganisation of the sector.



Photo: Verity Winsler



Photo: Beshlie Pool



Photo: Laney Christie



Photo: Chloe Chesswas

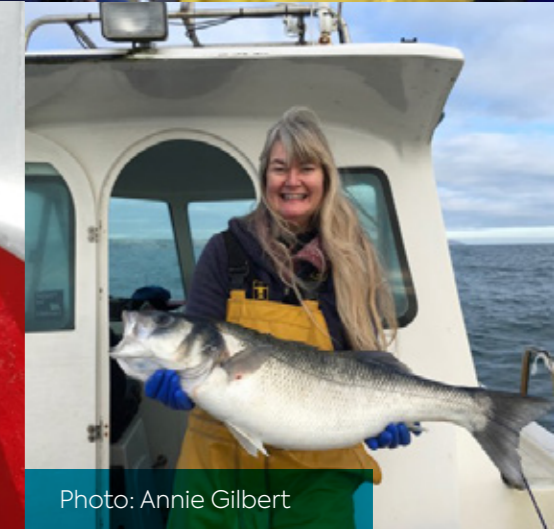


Photo: Annie Gilbert

## **References**

1. Frangoudes, Katia. 2013. Women in Fisheries: A European Perspective. Brussels: European Parliament Policy Department B.
2. Motova, Arina, and Marta Moran Quintana. 2019. 2018 Employment in the UK Fishing Fleet. Seafish Report No SR734.
3. Zhao, Minghua, Marilyn Tyzack, Rodney Anderson, and Estera Onoakpovike. 2013. "Women as Visible and Invisible Workers in Fisheries: A Case Study of Northern England." *Marine Policy* 37: 69–76.
4. Gustavsson, Madeleine, and Mark Riley. 2018. "Women, Capitals and Fishing Lives: Exploring Gendered Dynamics in the Llŷn Peninsula Small-scale Fishery (Wales, UK)." *Maritime Studies* 17: 223–231.
5. <https://seahospital.org.uk/seafit-programme/>



# Women in Fisheries

University of Exeter, Medical School,  
Knowledge Spa,  
Royal Cornwall Hospital Truro,  
Cornwall, TR1 3HD

[www.women-fisheries.com](http://www.women-fisheries.com)