

Women in global fisheries industry are falling through the safety net, study finds

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Millions of women who work in the fisheries industry are being left

behind as technologies develop to counter the effects of climate change and economic pressures.

New research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) looks specifically at post-harvest fisheries and aquaculture, where women constitute 50% of the total workforce. Despite their significant contributions, women often remain invisible, are unpaid or underpaid, their work seen as an extension of household work.

The findings, "A systematic review of the impact of post-harvest aquatic food processing [technology](#) on gender equality and social justice," are published today in *Nature Food*.

Fisheries and aquaculture are an important source of livelihood, food and nutrition for many of the world's poorest, supporting about 67 million people worldwide directly and about 492 million people indirectly. Fisheries and aquaculture provide about 17% of animal-source protein for [human consumption](#), yet more than a third of global fisheries and aquaculture harvest is lost or wasted.

Prof Nitya Rao, UEA Professor of Gender & Development and Director of the Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development, is the lead author. She said, "Given the large number of people, in particular women, engaged in post-harvest activities globally, this review sought to better understand how processing technology and technical change have impacted those engaged in this sector, and how labor, resources, power and [decision making](#) are influenced and change in this process.

"In the context of climate change and other economic pressures, we are witnessing a rapid development of post-harvest technologies to enhance productivity and efficiency, reduce loss and waste, and ensure quality. Yet without addressing the [social justice](#) dimensions of these changes, there is a risk that this may exacerbate pre-existing and persistent

inequalities."

Women are disadvantaged across both traditional and improved technologies, especially regarding control over resources. Women are often unable to access social protection benefits including minimum wages, health insurance, housing and transport, due to their concentration at the lower levels of the labor hierarchy.

As enterprises expand and adopt more capital-intensive technologies, women frequently report less agency and lower equity outcomes due to a combination of resource constraints, individual characteristics such as education, social norms and care responsibilities.

In the larger-scale, factory-based settings using advanced technologies, women and [migrant workers](#) tend to have lower status; often temporary, lower-paid jobs that are culturally stereotyped as 'women's work'; experience gender pay gaps, lack of access to worker rights and managerial roles; and are exposed to occupational health hazards. Labor divisions are stark, reinforced by social norms.

While power and control of resources is more unequal in factory settings, it is not necessarily equal in traditional contexts either, despite offering greater flexibility. While sometimes less productive, these technologies usually allow greater agency for women. Here one confronts a trade-off between enhanced productivity, income, and gender equality as seen in women's control over resources and decision-making agency.

Dr. Julie Bremner of the UK Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, and paper co-author, said, "Aquatic food is a key component of our global food system, particularly for seafood-reliant nations such as the large ocean states, and demand for aquatic products is forecast to grow. Sustainability of these foods depends not just on

their environmental and economic footprints, but also on their social equity footprint.

"Our review shows there is a way to go yet on the equity element, but there are opportunities waiting to be grasped."

The review makes several recommendations for policy, research and practice:

- The focus of fisheries' policymaking needs to embrace the entire aquatic food system, moving beyond capture fisheries and aquaculture to post-harvest processing, storage and consumption.
- More rigorous and comparative research is needed to examine the impacts of a range of technologies on different groups of people including women and men, young and elderly, migrant and non-migrant, and formally consider intersectionality.
- Diverse voices, especially women's and migrant worker voices, should have a place in policymaking and investment decisions around post-harvest processes at local, national and global levels in the process of developing and rolling out improved technologies.

The research team, which included other UEA and Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development colleagues, reviewed 42 studies covering 55 locations in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Philippines, Japan, Canada, U.S., Mexico, Brazil, Norway, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia.

More information: A systematic review of the impact of post-harvest aquatic food processing technology on gender equality and social justice, *Nature Food* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s43016-024-01034-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-024-01034-6)

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