CONTRIBUTION 4.3

Women Empowerment in the Belize Fishing Industry

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is the process by which females who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. There are gender inequalities in the distribution of power in the Belize fisheries sector. Perceptions on gender equality amongst women in the fisheries sector is that they are not treated fairly, and they do not have equal opportunity within a male dominated sector. Within Belize's fisheries sector, women are not generally engaged, consulted, or valued; consequently, they cannot fully attain their potential contribution to fisheries management and development. Yet, they make significant contribution to the fisheries sector. Women are involved in pre-harvest activities (preparing meals, vessels, fishing equipment, and bait for fishing trip; planning fishing trips, organizing crew); fishing operations; post-harvesting activities (processing, marketing, sale); and the preparation of fish meals (nutrition).

Intensified and focused efforts are needed to engage Belizean women and strengthen their capacity for action across segments of the fisheries sector. This paper draws on the case study of Belize's interventions to address the issues women face in the fisheries sector to illustrate key lessons of the transformative potential of women empowerment. The interactions of resources (access to material, human, and social resources), agency (processes of decision-making and negotiation), and achievements (well-being and outcome) combine to influence women's empowerment. Women became empowered by their acquisition of new skills, greater knowledge of the marine ecosystem in which they work, and external interventions. Thus, they were able to influence decisions about their future and with confidence they are more willing to participate in decision-making.

KEYWORDS: empowerment, fisheries, gender, women

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women make a significant contribution to the fishing industry throughout the world. These contributions in areas such as community work, household work, individual care, and fishing economies are rarely documented and oftentimes goes unseen (Monfort 2015; Biswas 2010; Zhao et. al. 2013; Bennett 2005). Biswas (2010: 10) states: "women's work in the fisheries has the same dominant qualities that characterize women's work in general: informal invisible; lowly in terms of status; segregated in terms of range and scale, and poorly paid, if paid at all." In the Caribbean, like the rest of the World, women make an invisible yet important contribution to the fishing industry (Grant 2004; Grant 2006; Grant et. al 2007; McConney et. al. 2013; GIFT 2017). However, there is limited research on gender issues related to fisheries in the Caribbean, and there is a paucity of gender disaggregated data and information on fisheries to assess the contribution of women and men in the industry.

A spotlight has now been placed on gender, with the approval of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines (FAO 2015; FAO 2017), voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication. These guidelines recognize gender equity and equality as fundamental to the development of small-scale fisheries. The Gender in Fisheries Team (GIFT) led by the University of the West Indies – Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies seeks to conduct applied interdisciplinary research and outreach to better understand and assist with policy and practice concerning gender in Caribbean small-scale fisheries. Through the efforts of GIFT and other practitioners, studies on women's role and social contribution in Caribbean fisheries are slowly emerging (GIFT 2017).

1.1 Women in Belize

In 2010, the estimated population of Belize was 324,528 people, of which 50% were females; with 30% of households headed by a female (Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). The 2016 Gender Gap Index, which measures women's disadvantages compared to men, ranked Belize 98 out of 144 countries with a score of 0.676 (World Economic Forum 2016). Poverty estimates for Belize showed that 16% of the population is critically poor (indigent), 41% living in poverty and 14% vulnerable to poverty. The poverty level was higher in rural than urban communities (Halcrow Group Ltd. 2010). The primary industries (agriculture and fishing) employed a large segment of the working poor, with male (93.3%) and female (6.7%) workers.

The economy is driven primarily by agriculture production (sugar, citrus, bananas, and marine products); however, tourism is the most important foreign exchange earner followed by manufacturing (crude oil) and international business services (CDB 2016). The labour force is about 148,736 or 46.1% of the total population, while 20.4% of females and 6.7% of males are unemployed (Statistical Institute of Belize 2013). The Country Gender Assessment (CDB 2016: 21) for Belize noted, "Belize has a significantly sex-segregated and male-dominated labour force, exemplified in part by male participation in the primary industries outnumbering female participation by nearly 19:1". The same trend is evident with male earnings in the formal labour force being greater than females, with female annual average income estimated at USD 4,475 and male USD 10,317 (CDB 2016). The National Women's Commission estimated that 60% of female labour is concentrated in services, stores, clerical work, domestic services-related jobs (cleaning, housekeeping, hair-braiding, etc.), with a lot more working at home as caregivers. While men are employed in a broad scope of employment opportunities across all sectors. The Country Gender Assessment also reported that women had more access to micro-financing than men, and female-led small-scale enterprises operated in the informal economy. Regarding gender and education, the national completion rate for primary school is very low (43%). However, there is a 38% completion rate for boys and 48% for girls attending primary school.

For secondary schools, the completion rate for boys is 56.6% and girls 65.1%. Notably, at the tertiary level, the female-to-male ratio is 1.68 (CDB 2016).

Studies show that ethnic and cultural diversity in Belize's communities' impacts gender roles in society; and patriarchy is deeply embedded in social institutions. The gender assessment (CDB 2016: 46) reported that, "traditional value and belief systems, reinforced through faith-based institutions including churches and schools, are highly influential and impactful in Belize. The faith-based community has actively called for the reinforcement of patriarchal household organizations, rigid definitions of male and female social roles, limited sexual and reproductive health rights, and the restriction of rights to vulnerable populations including sex workers and men who have sex with men". There were also challenges with the role and participation of women in power, leadership and decision-making.

Belize is party to several regional and international instruments and commitments to gender equality, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1990), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention of Belem Do Para (1994), The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1994), numerous International labour Organization (ILO) conventions guaranteeing women and men's rights to dignified employment and non-discrimination at the workplace, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The national framework for gender equality begins with the Constitution of Belize (1981) with numerous legal frameworks for the enforcement of these rights, including the National Gender Policy, which has full support at all levels of society and awaits adoption by Cabinet. Also, the Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy 2016-2019 and the Horizon 2030: National Development Framework for Belize 2010-2030 all have a strong gender-based framework that has been adopted by government and the private sector. The national gender and development agenda promotes the fight against poverty and the achievement of economic growth and sustainable development through gender equality and equity. This means gender equality should be considered and addressed in development policymaking, planning and programming decisions (FAO 2013; Catzim-Sanchez 2013; Government of Belize 2016; Government of Belize 2010; CDB 2016).

1.2 Women and the fishing industry

The fisheries sector contributes significantly to the economy of Belize mostly through export earnings and employment. The sector is characterized as being small-scale/artisanal and provides direct employment to 2,146 active fishers (of which 75 % are full-time members of Fishermen's Cooperatives) and over 400 processing plant personnel. Of the 1,809 registered fishers in Belize, 97% were males and 3% were females. Among the 47 registered female fishers, 85% were crew members, with many from the Stann Creek District. Data for vendors and processors are not captured in the Fisheries Department fishers and vessel registration database (Fisheries Department licensing and registration database January 2017). The Knowledge, Attitude and Behavioural Practice Survey (MCCAP 2016) provided a snapshot of gender demographics in twelve of fifteen major fishing communities in Belize. Of the respondents (N=2,696), 46% were females between the ages 18-29 years (or youths), and mainly of mestizo decent (35%). There was a significant difference between the educational levels of males and females (Sig. 0.025). The survey also found that only 3% of females were heads of households; and they were more likely to be of creole descent (38%) followed by mestizo (31%). Females who were heads of households are more likely to have attended a secondary school and continue to University or Junior College. On average, 66% of head of households are reportedly gainfully employed, with 37% of females headed households unemployed. The dominant livelihood activities for households in the twelve fishing communities were fishing (48%), tour guide (17%), agriculture (16%), livestock (13%), pasture

(7%), beekeeping (2%), and aquaculture (1%). Only 25% of households owned/leased land that is currently being used or is intended for farming, with only 5% of female head households involved in agriculture.

> "*Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that involves transforming ideas, norms, relationships and structures of resources and power allocation… Progress is never linear, assured or free from setbacks. But progress on women's empowerment can be, and has been, made in most countries around the world*" (O'Neil et. al., 2014).

Despite increased visibility of Belizean women in fisheries, more can be done to improve women's empowerment. The concept of empowerment is defined as the capacity to make strategic life choices, especially in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. Pena et al. (2019) noted that women fishers in Barbados would like to be more involved in the sector but apart from the gender roles constraining them, they also lack the confidence to do so. The lack of investments in training and capacity building for women also impedes them from actively participating in the fisherfolk's organizations, cooperatives, and women groups. Thus, this weakens their position to advocate for themselves as well as to maximize their income and economic independence. The Gender in Fisheries Team (GIFT) calls for intensified and focused efforts to advance women's economic empowerment agenda in the Caribbean fisheries sector (GIFT 2018). Like the Barbados' women in fisheries, Belizean women experience similar challenges (Castillo 2022a).

In this paper, we examine the three dimensions of women empowerment to assess how interventions by government and NGOs to advocate for Belizean women in fisheries so they can be empowered to expand their rights, resources, and capacity to make decisions and act independently in social, economic, and political spheres in Belize.

2. METHOD

We examined the different interventions, taking the adapted Kabeer (1999) and Batliwala (1992) theory (Figure 1), especially the concept of empowerment. Kabeer argued that women's ability to choose has three inter-related elements: **resources**, defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to material, human, and social resources and training; **agency**, their ability to use these resources to define and act on goals or choices, processes of decision-making, as well as less measurable manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation; and the **achievements** that result from these actions (realized capabilities). He also argued that the availability of resources coupled with the desire to achieve (or agency) can be thought of as equating to women's capabilities, and actual achievements as realised capabilities. Finally, we assessed the main categories of enabling conditions that were critical to women gaining more power and choice. These factors are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for analysing processes of women's empowerment.

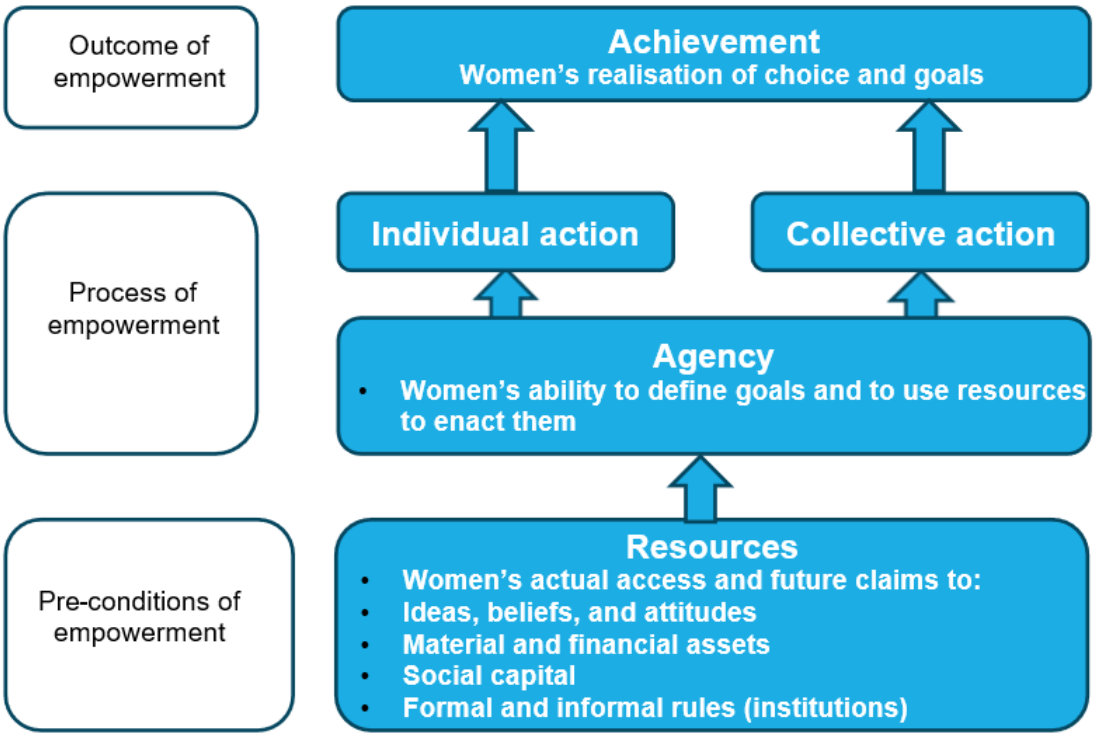

Figure 1. Women's empowerment as a process: a Schematic [Source: adapted from Kabeer (1999) and Batliwala (1992)]

In our work with women in the fishing industry, we recognize all women in fishing households and the fishing industry (along the fisheries value chain, working directly and indirectly in the industry). We understand that although some women do not directly fish or work in processing plants, they are considered part of the industry based on support to their spouses in pre-and post- fishing activities. We also recognize that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women – women are the agents of their own empowerment.

3. RESULTS

We based our assessment on interventions, which we present in chronological order according to year in which the activities were undertaken and/or funded by the Government of Belize and other external sources, in fishing communities in Belize between 2017 and 2023 (Table 1).Table 1: Sequence of events related to empowering women in Belize fishing industry.

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
1	The Revised National Gender Policy (2013)	The revised national gender policy is based on a vision of: "A society in which all men and women, boys and girls are able to achieve their full potential through the enjoyment of their rights; live together in mutual respect, dignity and harmony; and are equal partners as they participate in services and resources for realizing and sustaining their economic, social, political and cultural development for equal enjoyment of all."	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize	
2	Punta Negra women fishers (2015)	Received funding to build and equip a kitchen for food preparation and catering to tourists on the caye.	Alternative livelihoods action	Punta Negra, Belize	TIDE	2
3	Country Gender Assessment Belize (2016)	The CGA explores traditional systems and structures rooted in patriarchy and male dominance, as the core of persisting gender inequalities in Belize, which limit the capacity to promote a transformative gender equality agenda in the country. These patriarchal notions of social organisation systematize and institutionalize a gender hierarchy with various manifestations that cut across race, ethnicity, culture and age.	Research	Belize	Government of Belize/ Caribbean Development Bank	
4	Survey on gender equality in the fisheries sector: A female perspective 2017	Using the Gender equality in Caribbean fisheries questionnaire to understand female perspectives on gender equality. This study focused on five groups of women: (i) the policy actors (N=14), women working in senior and middle management, technical or administrative positions and are part of the daily management of the organizations or make daily fisheries management decisions; (ii) community members (N=29), females from fishing households in fishing villages; (iii) Processors (N=12) who worked in processing plants cleaning and packaging fish products; (iv) fishers (N=17); and (v) scalers/vendors (N=6).	Research	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	78
5	Women in Fisheries Forum 1, 13 June 2017	Promoting the achievement of gender equality and equity in the allocation of resources, rights, status and responsibilities	Forum	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP/WCS	52 from all aspects of the fisheries value-chain

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
		between women and men. Consequently, the participants were presented with the results of a study, which looked at the perception of women in fishing communities with regards to gender equality in general; and specifically, within the fisheries sector. Based on the outcome of the study, to develop an Action Plan to mainstream gender in the daily activities of Government Departments, NGO's and Projects.				
6	Participated at the 70th GCFI Conference in Merida, Mexico, 2-10 November 2017	Presented a poster on gender equality and equity in the fisheries sector in Belize and participated in various technical sessions.	Presenters	Mexico	Government of Belize/MCCAP	7
7	Micro and/or small business training (2017)	Support to fishermen and their families with capacity building that will assist them to improve their entrepreneurial abilities and/or operations in their respective businesses. Training included entrepreneurship lab, marketing and sales, costing & pricing, and basic financial statement.	Training and capacity building	Copper Bank, Belize	Belize Audubon Society and Belize Trade and Investment Development Services	3 F (Total 10)
8	Gender action plan (2017-2020)	First attempt at developing a plan to guide collaboration with various partners and implement activities related to communication, research, training, and M&E.	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP/WCS	
9	Training in Food Preparation, Hospitality, and Bartending, 2017 - 2018	This program of study is a blend of practical and theoretical training in the fields of Food & Beverage and Hospitality, with accompanying courses on Information Technology and Business Ethics & Entrepreneurship. Not only will trainees be able to operate effectively within any tourism related work environment, but also be able to start and operate their own business in a productive manner.	Training and capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	40 F (Total 50)
10	Training in Cosmetology (2017)	To develop the Individual practical skills, theoretical knowledge and professional attitudes necessary for success in the Cosmetology profession. The goal of this course is to qualify and equip the individual with good Human Relations Skills, Professional Attitude, and	Training and capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	14 F

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
17	Training in Indigenous Construction of Cultural Garment Programme (including Seine Bight Women Group) 2019	To equip trainees with skills in sewing including cultural indigenous garments and to become entrepreneurs. The training is combined with two support subjects, Business Ethics and Information Technology.	Training and capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	20 F (Total 21)
18	Training scholarship (2019)	Mrs. Cobb participated in a training course in Hospitality and cultural homestay exchange in Japan through JICA funding. This was a 6-week training from April to mid-May 2019. Ms. Johnson participated in Culinary and Hotel Management training in Taiwan for 2 months. Training was made possible through the Youth Vocational training project for the Caribbean.	Training	Japan and Taiwan	Government of Belize/JICA and Government of Taiwan	2F in-person
19	Women in Fisheries Forum 3, 6-7 June 2019	Gender and the Ocean: an opportunity to explore the gender dimension of humankind's relationship with the ocean. The Forum focused on Climate Change and its impact on the ocean and ultimately livelihoods. The presentations and discussions looked at climate adaptation measures, as a means of dealing with climate change. Women were introduced to alternative/ complementary fishing-based livelihoods, namely, (i) seaweed cultivation and (ii) deep slope fishing with upgraded equipment.	Forum	Dangriga, Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP/WCS	35
20	Bootcamp for Emprendedoras mujeres XtraOrdinarias I (2019)	Women across Belize participated in the 1st Regional Bootcamp for emprendedoras mujeres xtraordinarias, a capacity building opportunity for women in fisheries & aquaculture that aimed at providing them with the tools they needed to strengthen and grow their businesses via better financial management, sales and marketing. These women represented Seaweed, fishing, and tourism industry.	Training and capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/ SICA/OSPESCA	6
21	Gender Analysis, Strategy, and Action Plan on Gender Mainstreaming in Fisheries of	The 5-year action plan for CRFM outlines key components to sustain learning and capacity building; through the implementation of its activities and knowledge sharing between	Policy document	Regional	CRFM	

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
	Member States of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (2020)	and among countries, knowledge will be acquired, and capacity will be built.				
22	Sarteneja Homestay Women Group (2020)	To provide economic and employment opportunity for the eight- fishing household families living in Sarteneja Village through improvement of the environment for tourism in Sarteneja through enhancing the Sarteneja Homestay Group.	Alternative livelihoods action	Sarteneja, Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	8
23	Training in cleaning (COVID 19) at Best Western Hotel (2020)	Sensitize local tourism businesses, who are greatly affected by COVID-19 about the protocols for reopening, so they can safely welcome tourists to Sarteneja village. The focus of the session was on cleaning products and deep cleaning of rooms.	Training and Capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP	5
24	Pesca Tours (2020)	Pesca Tours is a sub-project under the project "Conservation of Marine Resources in Central America - Phase II" facilitated by MAR Fund, with funds provided by the German Government through KfW. The men gave an overview of the beach trap fishing conducted in the Corozal Bay area and harvesting demonstration, while the women of the Pesca Tour family prepared meals from the fish caught by the males.	Alternative livelihoods action	Sarteneja, Belize	Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development (SACD) and MarFund	6
25	Belize Women's Seaweed Farmers Association (2020)	The Nature Conservancy (TNC) foster the organization and legal registration of the Belize Women's Seaweed Famers Association (BWSFA). The also provided training and certified women to startup seaweed farms. The group developed three seaweed-based value-added products, launched a Facebook page & website, and drafted a strategic plan. From this group TNC trained and certified the first female seaweed cultivation trainer in Belize.	Alternative livelihoods action	Placencia, Belize	Government of Belize/MCCAP/TNC	9
26	Gender Policy for the Conservation Sector (2020)	This gender policy supports the achievement of equality between women and men to ensure sustainable development. It calls for: - advancing women's equal participation with men as decision-makers in the	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize	

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
		management of the Belize Protected Areas System; - to support women, girls, and children in the realization of their full human rights in the conservation sector; and - Reduction of gender inequalities in access to and control over the resources and benefits of sustainable development"				
27	Women in Fisheries Forum 4, 16-17 September 2021 (virtual)	Theme: Gender and Leadership: building leadership among fisher organizations being recognized as a pre-requisite needed for the implementation of the SSF guidelines in countries. Objective: To equip participants with the skills needed to allow for greater participation of women in leadership roles and decision-making positions so as to ensure the equitable participation of women in the management of Belize's SSF	Forum	Belize	WCS	35 F from 7 fishing communities
28	The 2021-2030 National Gender Policy and the accompanying Action Plan	The NGP seeks to "achieve gender equity and equality and end discrimination against women and girls in Belize." It focuses on the gaps and areas for further action in six primary pillars: health, education, wealth and employment creation, gender-based violence, women in power and decision-making and organizational system strengthening.	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize	
29	National Climate Change Gender Action Plan 2022-2027	outlines the main pillars for Belize's gender just and inclusive climate change planning and seeks to integrate climate change plans into socio-economic development plans and ensuring that society in all its diversity is engaged in managing climate at the micro and immediate scale.	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize	
30	Business Development training for women in fishing communities. 6 virtual training sessions from 23 November – 8 December 2021	To involve female participation for empowerment of women in preparation for increased involvement in Fishermen Associations, organization, and as entrepreneurs.	Training and capacity-building	Belize	WCS	Max 34, avg 25
31	Women in Fisheries Forum 5, 15-16 June 2022	Theme: Gender and Climate Change – understanding the Link. The aim was to support	Forum	Stann Creek, Belize	WCS/Government of Belize/FAO	50 F + 5 M

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
		women in utilizing their local knowledge, skills and leadership positions to respond to climate change within their fishing community and coastal zone. The meeting focused on monitoring erosion in Monkey River Village, and the use of hard and soft engineering adaptation methods.				
32	Gender Analysis of Belize's coastal zone and fisheries sector (2022)	To identify and analyze gender issues relevant to the coastal zone and fisheries sector.	Research	Belize	Government of Belize/FAO	
33	Gender strategy, action plan, and Monitoring and evaluation framework for the coastal zone and fisheries sector of Belize 2022-2027	To enable the intersectoral and collaborative approach to climate change adaptation planning and support the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented groups in adaptation planning, decision making processes and active participation and implementation of climate adaptation actions on the ground.	Policy document	Belize	Government of Belize/FAO	
34	Regional Women in Fisheries Forum at the 75th Meeting of the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute, Florida, USA 6 November 2022 (Hybrid)	Theme - We are not invisible: Celebrating, empowering, and supporting women in fisheries. Objectives: (1) Empower and celebrate women in fisheries along the value chain; (2) Discuss the hidden and unconscious biases women face in fisheries. (2a) Identify areas for improvement to better empower women? and (3) Highlight the diversity of work being carried out by women.	Presenters	USA	UWI/CERMES/GIFT/FAO and WCS	2 F in-person
35	Understanding women's role in Belize small-scale fisheries (2023)	An inventory of women's roles in Belize SSF sector. The survey allowed for the collection of general socio-economic data and in-depth information to understand women's work currently being performed by women along the SSF value chain.	Research	Belize	WCS	35
36	Bootcamp for Emprendedoras mujeres XtraOrdinarias II (2023)	Women across Belize participated in the 2nd Regional Bootcamp for emprendedoras mujeres xtraordinarias, a capacity building opportunity for women in fisheries & aquaculture that aimed at providing them with the tools they needed to strengthen and grow their businesses via better	Training and capacity building	Belize	Government of Belize/ SICA/OSPESCA	5

No.	Event	Purpose of the event	Type of event	Country	Organizers	# Females
		financial management, sales and marketing. These women represented Seaweed, fishing, and tourism industry.				
37	Invited as guest speakers at special events	Veronica Tun participated in the Smithsonian Earth Optimism festival during a live cooking demonstration of Lionfish Hudut. Anthony Valiulis of Netless Catch, a company that imports lionfish from Belize, joined Veronica on stage as the two shared the impact of the invasive species on Belize reef ecosystem. Paula Jacobs has participated in Ocean Conference in New York, GCFI meetings representing women fisherfolk.	Presenter	USA		2F in-person
38	Women in Fisheries Forum 6, 15-16 June 2023	To empower women in Belize's SSF to become recognized for their contribution to growth and development of the fisheries sector by becoming documented and to join local fisherfolk association and cooperatives, and to stimulate the development of networks for information sharing among the women participating in the WIFF.	Forum	Sarteneja, Belize	WCS	81

3.1 Resources

The results were possible due to available resources and training brought about by national, regional, and international interventions. The interventions in Table 1 were grouped into five categories: policy interventions; research actions; training and capacity building; alternative livelihood support; and presenters.

The **Policy/legal framework:** *Gender Action Plan (2017-2020); CRFM Gender analysis, strategy, and Action Plan on gender mainstreaming (2020); Gender Policy for the Conservation Sector (2020); The 2021-2030 National Gender Policy and the accompanying Action Plan; National Climate Change Gender Action Plan 2022-2027; and Gender strategy, action plan, and monitoring and evaluation framework for coastal zone and fisheries sector 2022-2027* (Castillo 2022b) helped to close the gaps identified between men, women, boys and girls through endowment and economic opportunities. The policy framework also ensures equality and equity for all, especially women and girls' empowerment. The CRFM *Gender analysis, Strategy, and Action Plan on Gender Mainstreaming in Fisheries of Member States of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (2020)* helped to guide the development of national gender policies in the fisheries sector in the Caribbean.

Research actions are required to understand women's roles and their perception on gender equality in the fisheries sector. Although there is a policy framework in place, there is still gender inequality in society and the fisheries sector (Castillo 2022a). The authors would like to highlight two studies that were conducted during the period.

1. A rapid scoping of perspectives on gender equality of five selected roles along the fisheries value chain was assessed in 2017 under the Belize Marine Conservation and Climate Adaptation Project (MCCAP). The researchers focused on using the Gender equality in Caribbean fisheries questionnaire to understand female perspectives on gender equality based on Section 8 of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines. This study focused on five categories of females working in the fishing industry: (i) management/ administration, women working in senior and middle management, technical or administrative positions and are part of the daily management of fisheries organizations or make daily fisheries management decisions (including government, private sector, Non-Government Organizations); (ii) community members, females from fishing households in fishing villages of northern communities of Belize, a predominantly mestizo community; (iii) Fishing, female fishers; (iv) Processors, females working in processing plants cleaning and packaging fish products; (v) Scalers/Vendors, females working at fish markets to scale fish purchased by consumers or females that sell fish. The study revealed (Table 2) that the type of work women do in the fishing industry has an impact of their perception of gender equality. In particular, women lower in the fisheries value chain are more likely to have a negative perception of the existence of gender equality.

Table 2. Results of female perception on gender equality in Caribbean fisheries based on the content of the small-scale fisheries guidelines (Source: MCCAP and WCS 2017)

Statement based on the content of the SSF Guidelines	Women's Response % (N=78)						
		Overall Total	Management/ Administration	Community members	Fisher	Processor	Scaler/ Vendor
Perception of gender in society							
Men and women are currently treated equally in society	Agree	34	7	66	36	0	17
Women and men currently have equal opportunities in society e.g., in education, professionals, pay, politics, etc.	Agree	53	23	68	70	0	50
The equality of women and men is backed by legislation	Agree	59	57	62	81	18	100
There is a national policy on gender that aims at equality	Agree	55	64	59	63	30	40
Perception of gender in fisheries							
Fisheries management and development currently take the needs of both men and women equally into account	Agree	53	50	68	53	25	50
There is no discrimination against women in fisheries	Agree	44	14	62	59	17	50
There is equal participation of men and women in the decision-making processes for fisheries plans, policies	Agree	45	43	55	59	9	20
Women are encouraged equally with men to participate actively in the existing fisher folk organizations you know	Agree	57	57	48	88	50	25
Men and woman have equal access to fisheries technical services, training and others for capacity development	Agree	67	72	72	81	60	0
Women and men have equal access to formal credit for fisheries such as bank or credit union loans, or grants	Agree	46	72	39	44	45	33

2. A recent study by the Wildlife Conservation Society, to understand the role of women in the Belize small-scale fisheries was conducted based on the observation that women's roles in Belize's SSF are poorly understood and documented, women's contribution to the sector's productivity is not fully recognized, existing fisheries policies lack gender considerations, and there are noticeable gender imbalances in fisherfolk organizations and fisheries decision-making bodies (Lewis Lamb unpublished data).

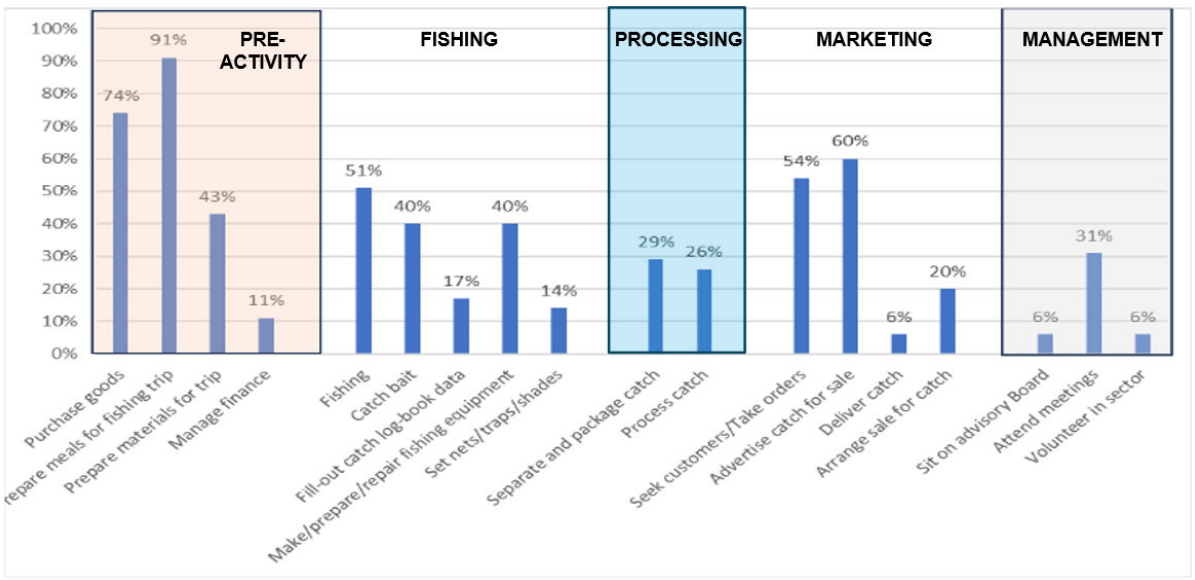

Figure 2. Work Performed by Women in Belize's Fishing Communities (N= 35)

The survey allowed for the collection of general socio-economic data as well as, more in depth information to help understand trends in perception, fisheries activities and roles. Women are actively involved in all aspects of the fisheries value chain (Figure 2), from pre-harvest, harvesting, processing, and retail. Pre-harvest activities involved preparing meals (91%), purchasing goods (74%) for the fishing trips such as ice and rations, having materials ready for the trip (43%) such as ice boxes and other storage containers, preparing and repairing fishing equipment (40%), and collecting and sorting bait (40%). In some instances, women indicated they planned the trips, organized the crew, and recorded trip expenses (11%). Regarding direct fishing, half of the respondents stated they fished (51%). Women also performed post-harvest activities related to the marketing and sale of seafood (60%) in their communities. They also reported being involved in processing the catch (26%). Some women also reported that they attended fisheries related (31%) meetings and a small percentage sat on fisheries management advisory boards (6%). Of note none of the women reported that they attended fishermen cooperative meetings (Lewis Lamb, unpublished data 2023).

The study also sought to understand level of women's involvement in fisherfolk organizations such as associations and cooperatives, which by design provide technical and financial assistance to members as well as document their contribution to the productivity of the sector. The results indicated that from the 51% of women who stated they fish only 67% reported having a commercial fisherfolk license indicating that a considerable amount of women who fish are not registering for a fisherfolk license. In addition, only 33% respondents who indicated that they possessed a valid fisherfolk license stated they are a member of a Cooperative while only 17% reported being a member of a fisherfolk association. Survey respondents indicated that resources are needed to encourage women to become registered and documented such as multi-year licenses and decentralization of the registration process. They added some reform is needed in the culture of fishermen cooperatives and fisherfolk associations to encourage women-members to join so that women's contribution to the productivity of the sector is documented and their voices are represented on decision-making bodies.

Over 19 **training and capacity building** initiatives were organized during the period 2016 – 2023. Such activities involved skills certificate training in food preparation, hospitality, and bartending, cosmetology, computer services and repairs, electrical installation, tour guide, indigenous construction of cultural garment, micro/small business training, and culinary and hotel management. All courses, except tour guide included training in entrepreneurship and Information Technology. Over 181 females benefited from these training. Leadership training was also provided to 35 women during the COVID-19 pandemic to develop marketing skills using social media. The yearly Women in Fisheries Forums 1 to 6 provided a means to build climate change adaptation skills and an understanding of their rights as women and the marine environment in which they work. Each Forum saw the participation of 35 to 81 women from Government Regulatory agencies, NGO communities, fishing communities, factory processing establishments, fishers, vendors (MCCAP and WCS 2017, 2018, 2019; WCS 2021a, 2021b, 2023; FAO and WCS 2022).

Women also received **alternative livelihood support**, mainly in the form of kitchen equipment to enhance food preparation and catering for the tourism industry in Punta Negra, Hopkins, Riversdale, Belize City, Consejo, Copper Bank, and Sarteneja; and one group provided accommodations in their homes in Sarteneja, while another farmed and sold seaweed value-added products in Placencia. Over 10 groups/individual females benefitted from alternative livelihood economic activities.

3.2 Agency

As part of the initiatives outlined in section 3.1, women developed leadership, decision-making, and negotiation skills. The knowledge acquired by women through their new roles also gave them the opportunity to participate in collective actions and decision-making. For example, women actively sought information, registered and received fishing license. The number of fishing licences issued to women increased from 47 (2017) to 97 (2023) (Kenneth Esquivel, Fisheries Department, Belize, personal communications 2023). The number of women nominated for fishers of the year also increased; 3 of the 7 recipients who received fishers of the year awards were women. A woman was nominated and elected as president of a Fishermen Association for the first time. We also observed women becoming more resourceful and self-sufficient in finding creative ways to provide for their households. For example, they cooked food, and pastries from their homes to provide alternative income for the household. In Placencia the women came together to form the Belize Women's Seaweed Farmers Association (https://www.bwsfa.com/), where they farmed seaweed together and developed three seaweed-based value-added products (dried seaweed, seaweed gel, and seaweed powder). Marketing of the product is done via their website and Facebook page.

Women achieved greater knowledge of the marine ecosystem in which they worked. The conversations at Forum meetings focused on climate change impacts and adaptation strategies. According to Ann Gordon (Consultant, Belize, Personal Communication 2018) women can be key agents of adaptation to climate change, as they have responsibilities in the households, communities, and as stewards of natural resources. This positions them to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities. The MCCAP knowledge, attitude and practice survey (2016) asked respondents about their concerns/feelings about climate change; 31% said they were confused and needed more information, and 26% said they were fearful/afraid or powerless. The example, the Women in Fisheries Forums provided opportunities for women to understand climate change adaptation measures such as alternative livelihoods, impacts on fishing, and hard and soft engineering adaptation methods (MCCAP/WCS 2019, FAO and WCS 2022, WCS 2023). These demonstrations and capacity-building activities on climate change allowed women to reduce their anxiety as they started to consider their own community and design adaptive or mitigation strategies to reduce their vulnerability.

The authors observed that women are more confident and able to influence decisions about their future. Confidence makes them more willing to participate in decision-making. For example, women were invited and presented at international meetings and regional forums. With confidence they were able to express and articulate their needs and future vision for themselves. Other examples include: (i) a female fish scaler after getting her fisherman's license, decided that she did not just want to be a fish scaler anymore but wanted to purchase a boat and engine to increase her income base. She went to every financial institution to try to get a loan but was unsuccessful because she did not have all the requirements that banks required. (ii) After the business development training for women, one participant who owns a gift shop, shared that she was going to apply for a loan but realized that by rearranging the gift shop, she can better promote her goods; after which she decided it was not necessary. (iii) At the Women in Fisheries Forum 6, the women decided that they wanted to form a national women's group, so they could receive funding to support women initiatives in communities. In many cases, these women started informal groups in their communities and supporting of each other.

3.3 Achievements

Whether by individual or collective action, the knowledge acquired by women through their new roles and their self-confidence, self-sufficient and resourceful spirit they have made steps toward their own empowerment. They have been able to:

- Develop Facebook page for marketing of their small businesses (fishing and otherwise)
- Advocate and participate in the development of Fisheries Specific Management Plans
- Participate/lead community development activities
- Strengthen existing women groups/ establish new groups
- Expand their small businesses
- Participate and present at international/regional conferences
- Increase the number of women with fishing licenses making them eligible for opportunities in the fishing industry.

We identified three drivers that contributed to women's empowerment in Belize small-scale fisheries. First, the presence of strong female role models who inspired women. Women leading fisheries, environment, labour, women's department, coastal zone, and marine conservation from Government regulatory agencies and NGOs who were supportive and willing to assist the ladies – inspired the women to acquire confidence and skills to participate in decision-making but more importantly, create a vision for their lives and business and influence decisions for their future. The second driver was an enabling policy framework that supported equality and equity for women and girls. Finally, the support of the Fisheries Department and NGOs such as Wildlife Conservation Society was important in supporting women's empowerment by promoting equal opportunities for women and facilitating training and capacity building initiatives for women - and the space to be heard.

4. CONCLUSION

There is gender inequality in the distribution of power in the Belize fisheries sector. Women in fisheries are generally not treated fairly, nor engaged, consulted, or valued. Consequently, these women cannot fully realize their potential contribution to fisheries management and development. Yet, women make significant contribution to the fisheries sector. Women are involved in pre-harvest activities (preparing meals, vessels, fishing equipment, and bait for fishing trip; planning fishing trips, organizing crew); fishing; post-harvesting activities (processing, marketing, sale); and the preparation of fish meals (nutrition).

Resources that promote capacity building and increased awareness engages women and strengthen their capacity for action. Women became empowered by their acquisition of new skills, greater knowledge of the marine ecosystem in which they work, and external interventions. Thus, they were able to influence decisions about their future and with confidence they are more willing to participate in decision-making. Women who were once denied, now have the ability to make strategic life choices – empowerment. Throughout this process of women's empowerment, we observed transformation within the group. We saw an increase in the number of young females participating in various fora and training activities. We observed growth in businesses, , increased participation in meetings, and the demonstration of willingness to take risks to grow their businesses. Belize is, however, a long way from gender equality and equity in the fisheries sector, despite making steady progress on women's empowerment. Among other things, there are still the issues of access and acceptance that women in fisheries in Belize need to overcome.

According to the Gender Inequality Survey (Table 2) 54% of women believe that women and men do not have equal access to formal credit for fisheries such as bank or credit union loans,

or grants. Also, 54% of women surveyed agreed that they would like to perform another type of work in the fisheries sector. However, most agreed that they lacked the assets to venture into a new type of work (Lewis Lamb, unpublished data 2023). Banks require proof of income, which most women are not able to provide, thus being unable to overcome this hurdle for obtaining flexible credit facilities. In some instance they lacked social security cards or proper documentations to gain access to a fisherman's license. Yet, these women are taking small steps – they first seek to be documented and then register as a licensed commercial fisherfolk.

One driver of women's empowerment is the level of support from men (Torre, et.al., 2019). Studies found that women in Belize are not willing to join Fishermen Cooperative – these cooperatives provide benefits to their members such as access to project funding and grants as well as participate in the management of the sector. Consequently, women should be encouraged to join in order to gain access and ensure their voices can be represented on decision-making bodies. Reform is required to the culture of the fishermen cooperatives and associations to encourage women members so they can receive benefits and participate in decision-making (Lewis Lamb unpublished data 2023). Murray (2023) made the point that there are some effective ways that men can support women in seeking to achieve gender responsive or transformative social justice. In supporting women, men give them the acknowledgement and the safe space to achieve equality.

The women's empowerment journey should continue through ongoing efforts to build the capacity of women in fishing communities, particularly in processing and marketing, where they seem to experience inequality the most. Further work is required to enhance networking and advocacy skills, business management skills, and leadership skills. These are critical skills required to facilitate women's realization of their choices and goals—the outcome of women's empowerment.

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