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Gender equality at sea? An analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic



Introduction

Fisheries and aquaculture have suffered from the effects of COVID-19 since the early stages of the virus' spread, due to the closure of international markets and the fall in prices of fish and seafood¹. This has put the health, economy, security, and social protection of communities at risk, and in turn, exacerbated pre-existing inequalities between women and men.

Internationally, it has been estimated that for every two workers in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, one is a woman². Despite this, data with a comprehensive vision of the consequences of the COVID-19 health crisis are scarce. Some general approaches on the possible impacts of COVID-19 in fisheries, separated by gender, have been made, based on previous case studies or extrapolated from the impacts on other economic activities^{3,4}. However, incorporating a gender perspective into the analysis of the impacts of the pandemic remains a necessity. This will allow the needs and capacity for action and adaptation of the fishers in generating inclusive strategies and recommendations for recovery, that consider all the people involved in fisheries and aquaculture.

In this fourth report, we present the results of a national consultation made by Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C.⁵ with small scale fishers, in order to document the impacts COVID-19 has had on men and women in fishing communities in Mexico. Incorporating a gender perspective to generate information and design adaptive solutions is an essential component of strengthening the resilience of fishing communities in the current crisis.

What was done?

From 29th June to 9th July 2020, 220 phone interviews⁶ (57 women and 163 men) were conducted thanks to the network of fishers consolidated during previous reports^{1,7,8}. Out of the 220 interviewees, 201 reported belonged to a fishing or aquaculture organization (25% women, 67% men) and 19 did not belong to any organization (1% women, 7% men). Of the total number interviewed, 130 interviewees (8% women and 51% men) participated in capture or harvest and 90 (18% women, 23% men) participated in post-harvest activities such as catch cleaning and processing, administration, sale or distribution. The average age of participants was 41 years, ranging from 19 and 73 years. Information was collected from 77 fishing communities located in 12⁹ of the 17 coastal states in Mexico on the following themes: 1) use of personal protective equipment, and access to medical services and information, 2) economic and job security, 3) access to subsidies and benefits, and 4) distribution of domestic work and support networks for women.

Social media was monitored, capturing data from 71 profiles: 28 Facebook profiles of community partners (10 women, 18 men), six official fishing cooperative fanpages, 19 Twitter profiles and 18 Facebook profiles related to gender issues. In total, 935 Facebook and Twitter messages were analyzed.

Access to medical services and information and use of protective equipment

Exactly half of the men interviewed said they were affiliated to healthcare systems, compared to 39% of interviewed women. The stage of the supply chain in which the highest percentage of men reported being affiliated is capture (30%), while for women it is administration (7%); this is consistent with the gender division of labor in fishing (capture-men, pre/post-harvest and complementary work – women) reported in other studies¹⁰.

Interviewees were affiliated to the government health systems—IMSS (66%), followed by *Seguro Popular* (29%) and ISSSTE (5%)¹¹. This pattern is observed both in affiliated women: 51% IMSS, 38% *Seguro Popular* and 8% ISSSTE (3% of women did not specify the health system to which they belong); and men, 71%, 24% and 5%, respectively. Fifty-four percent of affiliated men and 46% of affiliated women, are the title holders of these social services, reducing their vulnerability as they do not depend on a third party.

A high percentage (96%) of the interviewees reported the use of equipment to protect themselves from

COVID-19. The seven people who reported not to use personal protective equipment live in remote areas (Campeche, Yucatán and islands of Baja California Sur), which since the beginning of the pandemic (March-April) the entry and exit of people was restricted in their communities.

To keep themselves informed about protection measures and the evolution of the pandemic, both women and men use social media as their main source of information (61% women and 56% men). Almost all (93%) interviewees use an electronic device (e.g. cellphone, TV, computer); however, women use radio (7%) more than men (0.6%). On average, 31% of interviewees mentioned situations related to digital exclusion in their communities (limited access to internet or unstable connections) or to themselves (lack of ability to pay). Of these, more women (39%) reported experiencing problems with internet access than men (28%).

Economic and labor security

Data from the interviews show that only 14% of interviewees (5% women, 9% men) continued their normal activities during the pandemic. Sixty three percent of interviewees (12% women, 51% men) reported having stopped and resumed their activities, with Baja California Sur (13%), Baja California (8%) and Yucatán (7%) being the three states where re-activation of fishing activities has been reported. In Quintana Roo, the resumption of fishing was also mentioned (12%); however, this was due to the re-opening of the spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) fishing season. Nayarit is the only entity where all

interviewed women have resumed their work in the fishing sector, while in Yucatán none of the women have returned to work. Overall, 23% of the participants (9% women and 14% men) have still not resumed their activities.

For women, reactivated activities mainly relate to post-harvest (74%) such as catch cleaning and processing, administration, sales and distribution, followed by harvest (19%) and pre-harvest (7%). For men, extraction is the main activity where they have begun to work again (69%), followed by post-harvest (31%).



Almost half (49%) of the interviewees reported that before the pandemic their organization did not process catches for sale. Since COVID-19, 15% of people who did not process the product started to change their presentation as a strategy for accessing new markets. Of the 220 interviewees, 32% indicate that both women and men are responsible for processing the catch, 13% said that this activity is done only by men and 10% stated that the activity is carried out only by women. Forty-four percent of the interviewed people did not process their catch.

In general, participants consider that their fishing organizations have supported women and men equally (64%), since even when they stopped activities salaries for both sexes were respected. Likewise, they indicate that there was no distinction in providing support, because according to the type of organization (cooperative) they believe that all members have the same rights and obligations. On the other hand, people who consider that the support has not been equal (14%) said that this is because women do not participate in extraction or that they are not members of the cooperative, despite being involved in other activities in the supply chain such as processing or administration. A fisherwoman said, *“Normally the subsidies are for those who participate in the extraction”*. Another participant added *“Most of the fishers are men, and because we don’t fish, they don’t take us into account”*. Other reasons highlighted by participants included not belonging to a fishing organization (8%), the lack of funds from their

organization (6%), or that their cooperative is made up only of men (5%) or women (3%).

According to the interviewees, those who administer the household finances are mainly women (38%), men and women together (35%), men (23%) and diverse people in the household (5%). Out of the 220 interviewed people, 161 (29% women, 71% men) said that they have changed the way they administer their incomes since the pandemic. Reduced income and the incentive to save as a preventive measure, limit domestic spending to basic necessities and payment of services (electricity, water, telephone, internet, etc.). In addition, interviewees pointed out that items in the basic food basket have increased in cost. Furthermore, a new expense was added, products for hygiene or the prevention of respiratory diseases. Several people indicated that women are the ones who stay at home and/or during the quarantine men do the grocery shopping.

Almost half (45%) of the participants reported that women in their communities are taking part in alternative economic activities to generate income during the pandemic. States where these activities are reported the most are Baja California Sur and Sonora (19%), Yucatán (15%) and Quintana Roo (12%). Some of the alternative activities discussed were preparing and selling food, selling products (clothing, shoes, jewelry, or makeup), making personal protective equipment and doing laundry or housekeeping.

Access to subsidies and benefits

Of the total of interviewees, 166 received BIENPESCA¹² support (78% men and 22% women). The subsidies provided mainly targeted people who participate in capture and harvesting. However, the interviewees mentioned that the subsidies were also delivered to people who participate in other stages of the supply chain (pre- and post-harvest) such as administration, distribution, cleaning, and sales. This aligns with CONAPESCA's communication about the distribution of BIENPESCA this year, where it was stated that for the first-time women participating in the supply chain would receive the support⁸. The perception of participants indicates that in their organizations, men received 87% of the subsidies, while women only received 13%.

Two-thirds (67%) of the interviewees consider that women have had the same opportunities

to receive subsidies and support from government organizations. This is because they believe that people who participate in activities of pre- and post-harvest are part of the fishery and they have the same rights to receive the benefits. One-third consider that the subsidies are only for people who participate in extractive activities. Food donations were considered to be equally delivered to women and men. There is general unease among the interviewees about the way subsidies and donations were distributed, since it is perceived that some subsidies, such as BIENPESCA, were given to people who do not participate in the production chain, for example waiters, teachers, retired workers from the Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE), taxi drivers and relatives of people involved in politics.

Domestic work distribution and impact on support networks for women

More than half of the participants (54%) did not perceive any changes in the distribution of domestic work due to COVID-19. In the context of unemployment, this suggests some difficulty with flexibility to change or redistribute tasks by both genders. Comments ranged from *"Everything remains the same"* (Fisherwomen, 2020) to *"As I spent more time at home, I have to help more"* (Fisherman, 2020). In many cases, the perception is still that the man "helps" the women with domestic duties, they do not share responsibility equally. This reflects the double or triple workload for women who in addition to working and taking care of the family often have other responsibilities - *"I do more activities now, because after my mom passed away, I am in charge of our home"* (Fisherwoman, 2020).

In caring for daughters and sons in the context of COVID-19, perceptions are different for men and women. Thirty-two percent of men perceived that both (mother and father) take care of their children; while just 16% women perceived the same. One third of women consider that they are responsible for this activity, but only 15% of men agree. This indicates a disparity in the interpretation of the information that may come from the perception that "helping" is the same as "being responsible for". On the other hand, 78% of the people who report that they are taking care of a sick person, mention that it is mostly the women (mothers, daughters, sisters) who carry out this activity.

Findings in social media

Out of the 935 analyzed messages, only 203 were linked to gender issues. Of these messages, 68 were related to COVID-19 and 31 were directly related to COVID-19, gender and fisheries together, that is only 3% of the total messages analyzed. This suggests the lack of the incorporation of gender perspective in fisheries and aquaculture in the context of the global pandemic crisis.

The key words used were: COVID-19, gender, women, equality, leadership and fishing. Messages monitored were related to effects linked to the pandemic and the important role women play in economic activities and acknowledgement for the work they undertake. Specific male activities

were not mentioned; nevertheless, this might be related to the fact that “*pescadores*” (a male-gendered word for fishers in Spanish) automatically makes the reader think of fishermen.

Just over half (55%) of the messages focused on the resumption of work and the economic autonomy of women, 29% were directed to the distribution of domestic work and 16% of the messages referred to access to medical information, the evolution of pandemic and the use of protective measures such as masks, protection of women and their babies against COVID-19, response plans for a stronger and more resilient world, as well as promoting the #QuédateEnCasa¹³. (#StayHome) hashtag.

Recommendations to strengthen inclusive, resilient communities

Everybody counts and everybody contributes. Effective measures in response to the health crisis, need to consider the economic, social, and environmental effects of the pandemic on all members of society, particularly vulnerable groups. For this reason, including a gender perspective in COVID-19 impact analysis leads to recognizing the work (often unpaid) carried out by women, such as caring for children and the sick. In addition to this, women in many cases, share responsibilities related to the household economy with men.

Fishing is more than just extraction. Although extractive activity (capture and harvesting) is a fundamental stage for the sector, considering pre-harvest and post-harvest activities is crucial to measure COVID-19 impacts and developing adaptive strategies for fishing communities. By halting resource extraction, women and men who contribute at different stages of the supply chain are also impacted, since their economic income depends directly on the fisheries.

Reduce the digital divide for women and men in fishing communities. The use of digital technologies, as well as access to internet, has become essential for accessing medical information and for risk and disaster prevention measures, particularly under current confinement conditions. We suggest supporting the use and access to these technologies, as well as strengthening the capacities of fishing communities in the use of digital tools. Digital strategies should also be combined with no-digital means to ensure that people not familiar with, or unable to access, technology are not left behind.

In COBI, we will continue expanding the geographical coverage and considering the different stages of the supply chain to better represent the voices of small-scale fisheries on the path to an inclusive and sustainable reactivation. The next report will focus on the COVID-19 effects on the health of small-scale fishers and will be distributed in the first week of September.

¹ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COBI-Reporte-1-Covid19-y-Pesca-Ingles-1-mayo-1.pdf>

² FAO. 2020. The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020. Sustainability in action. Rome.

<https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9229en>

³ <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/q-and-a/impact-on-fisheries-and-aquaculture/en/>

⁴ https://portals.iucn.org/union/sites/union/files/doc/gbv_and_covid-19_nota_informativa_abril_1.1.pdf

⁵ Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI) (www.cobi.org.mx) is a civil society organization that has promoted marine conservation and sustainable fisheries for 21 years through the participation of all stakeholders.

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⁶ Interviews were conducted by COBI with the support of Smartish, A. C. and The Nature Conservancy.

⁷ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1.-COBI-Report-COVID-19-fisheries-Role-of-the-State-1jun2020.pdf>

⁸ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COBI-Local-solutions-to-the-COVID-19-1th-July-Eng.pdf>

⁹ Baja California, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco y Yucatán.

¹⁰ Hapke, HM, Ayyanketil, D. 2018. Gendered livelihoods in the global fish-food economy: a comparative study of three fisherfolk communities in Kerala, India. *Maritime Studies* 17:133-143.

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<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0228912>

¹¹ IMSS (Mexican Social Security Institute) offers its benefits to workers in the private sector. ISSSTE (Institute of Security and Social Services of State Workers) covers public workers of the federal government and federal entities. Seguro Popular is for those who do not have access to health services.

¹² Support Component for the Wellbeing of Fishers and Aquaculturists of CONAPESCA. This program (formerly called PROPECSA) is delivered annually to support fishing groups during closures. Due to the COVID-19, the federal government advanced the delivery of this subsidy.

¹³ Campaign by the Mexican government to promote social isolation.