

# The role of women in fishing

Throughout history, women's contributions have been systematically underrepresented or obscured by male-dominated narratives. What was true in the past is still true today.



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Gathering mangrove bivalves in Sarasau, Indonesia.

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In the mangrove swamps of the Pacific, men devote themselves to raising livestock and hunting, while women contribute to meals by fishing and gathering invertebrates (prawns, crabs, shellfish, etc.) from the shore. A discreet but fruitful practice. The effectiveness of fishing techniques used by women in villages close to reefs in East Timor and Papua New Guinea is a case in point. Combined with a wide range of socioecological knowledge, these practices enable them to collect more than 220 species of marine invertebrates from mud, mangrove roots, coral reefs and under rocks. Some are used for food, others for ornamentation, for sale or for children's games.

This fishing is far from anecdotal; it is one of the keys to local food security, thanks to the high nutritional value of the species collected, which make a major contribution to the nutritional balance of the local community. However, this activity is not at all accounted for or recorded by systems for quantifying or managing fish stocks. In the official statistics, this subsistence fishing simply does not exist. It is invisible, as is the essential role played by women who are considered to be "homemakers" when in fact they are fisherwomen.

For the moment, at least. In Timor, the creation of marine protected areas in women's traditional fishing grounds is threatening these valuable cultural practices. Because of the distance they now have to travel to collect molluscs, crabs and other marine invertebrates, the village women are gradually giving up this practice and turning to manufactured products with little nutritional value. On top of the nutritional deficit, this phenomenon threatens to wipe out valuable knowledge and skills. Steps are being taken to recognise the significance of these fisheries and ensure fair access to aquatic resources.

... In the Pacific, fishing by women plays a predominant but largely underestimated role ...



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Shellfish harvesting in Limonak, Papua New Guinea.

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Children fishing on a reef flat in Reao, French Polynesia. © IRD/S.Andréfouët

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