

WOMEN AT THE HEART OF COASTAL COMMUNITY FISHERIES



Small-scale coastal fisheries are critically important to the livelihoods and food security of billions of people worldwide. However, these community fisheries are on the frontlines of numerous threats, including climate change, growth of the industrial fishing sector, and exploitative markets.

Many envision fishing as a male-dominated industry with most activity taking place offshore, but women are in fact the backbone of the industry, representing 40% of fishworkers and up to 80%-90% of the post-harvest seafood sector globally. Despite this, women rarely occupy leadership or managerial positions in seafood supply chains and are often excluded from the decision-making that impacts their livelihoods, personal rights, and safety.

Recognizing and fortifying women's skills in marine conservation leadership can increase the role of women in environmental decision-making, improving coastal management, and reduce conflict and gender-based violence within communities.

At Conservation International, we work to expand women's roles and rights in seafood value chains and enable their capacity as agents of progress. Here we explore the journeys of three women who have left their mark on marine conservation and influenced positive change in their communities and beyond.

AT A GLANCE



3 IN 7

people globally depend on fish as their primary source of protein and micronutrients.



500M

people rely on small-scale coastal fisheries, at least partially, for their livelihoods.



40%

of people employed in small-scale fisheries are women.



Beatrice next to her new fishing canoe

LIBERIA INVESTING FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE FISHING SECTOR

In Liberia, women are an integral part of the fishing economy, making up 90% of all fish vendors. With their outsized influence on an industry that represents roughly 10% of Liberia's gross domestic product, women have the potential to be great agents of change.

Beatrice Kpeh, a fishmonger from Liberia's Cestos community, is one of those women. After years of purchasing fish on credit and selling at a marginal profit to support her household, Beatrice knew she needed to expand her business for her family to prosper. In 2023, this dream became a reality when Beatrice received a microloan from Conservation International. She leveraged this capital to expand her business by purchasing

much-needed supplies like a canoe and responsible fishing gear and employing three men to secure a steady supply of fish. In addition, she diversified her income from fishing by starting a brick molding business – one that is also supplying bricks for the construction of her new four-room house.

This loan and granting facility is a part of the Blue Oceans Program, supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) through the Embassy of Sweden in Liberia and Conservation International. To date, we have disbursed USD \$125,000 to more than 550 women fishmongers through Village Savings and Loans Associations. With just a small boost in capital, Beatrice and her family, and many other women like her, are now more financially secure.

PERU

WOMEN-LED MONITORING INFORMS MORE RESPONSIBLE FISH HARVESTS

Thanks to the natural convergence of temperate and tropical ocean current systems, the Tumbes region of northern Peru boasts the highest marine biodiversity in the country and supports extremely productive fisheries. This ocean area serves as a corridor and refuge for humpback whales traveling with their calves, while mantas and whale sharks feed in the rich waters, adding to the region's allure for visitors and fishers alike. Unfortunately, this overlap of such a biodiverse habitat with highly productive fishing areas often results in undesirable interactions between fishers and protected species, including severe bycatch issues and the destruction of fishing gear.

Milagritos Alburqueque of the Punta Mero community in Tumbes has seen firsthand the struggles that many local fishers face as they navigate coexistence with a vibrant marine ecosystem. To better understand and address these issues, Milagritos and other women from Punta Mero partnered with Conservation International's team in Peru to pilot a women-led fishery monitoring program. Together with 37 of her neighbors, Milagritos learned how to collect fish stock data and monitor interactions with protected species like whale sharks. "We feel incredibly valuable because we're gathering all this information, which allowed us to assist the fishermen in determining which fish are more abundant in each season...I feel very grateful to have been trained as a monitor," says Milagritos.

This program will enable local authorities to work with fishers to design new management and climate adaptation strategies, charting a path that will help protect the region's vulnerable biodiversity while ensuring continued economic opportunities for the communities reliant on healthy fish stocks for their food and livelihood security. There is still a long way to go, but Milagritos and the people of Punta Mero are determined to create change. "I hope the project continues so that we can continue assisting the fishers in understanding which species are available and which ones are dwindling."



Left: Milagritos Alburqueque at a monitoring program meeting; Right: Woman collecting data on a fresh catch



Liliana in her seafood restaurant on Chira Island

COSTA RICA

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM NEWCOMER TO COMMUNITY LEADER

Liliana Martínez left her parents' home in central Costa Rica at age 19 in search of a lost sister. Following a hunch, Liliana traveled to Chira, an island located inside the calm and bountiful waters of the Gulf of Nicoya. Liliana arrived at Chira knowing nothing about the sea. However, after reuniting with her sister, Liliana recognized that she must become a person of the sea to achieve independence and success in her new home.

By overcoming her discomfort on the water and traditional biases against young female "outsiders", Liliana grew to become a highly skilled fisherwoman, seafood cook, and reputable community member. "Faced with need, fear disappears," says Liliana as she describes learning to fish and adapting to her new life. When COVID-19 brought economic hardship, fishing provided Liliana and her sister with a reliable source of income and food. But Liliana recognizes that the future of their fishing resources is at risk, particularly in the face of climate change.

Conservation International has a long-standing relationship with the coastal women leaders of Isla Chira, where they are engaged in activities like the establishment of protected areas and responsible fishing areas, mangrove restoration, shellfish aquaculture, and a diversified livelihoods program. Through these initiatives, Liliana and her fellow community leaders have been able to realize tangible positive change in their communities and encourage the uptake of more climate-resilient and sustainable fishing approaches. For Liliana, the dream is to build a community capable of adapting together, driven by creativity and determination: "I'm still that young fisher with the optimism in my heart that fishing never ever disappears."