

## Engaging women for enduring conservation

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I was recently invited to a meeting hosted by United States State Department Climate Envoy to discuss ways to improve women's participation and innovation in the emerging green and blue economies. It was a small group, including programme leaders from around the world and delegates from the highest levels of US government. Some of us had worked in conservation at community level for most of our careers, while others had expertise in financial markets, sanitation and clean energy. We all had diverse experiences and ideas, but one theme was persistent across every single speech and presentation: women are still not represented or considered at all levels. From household decision-making to local and national policy development to international forums, women are still under-represented, and their unique ideas and innovative solutions are not always considered.

Globally, experts who work on gender emphasise the importance of "women's empowerment" regarding economics, health, and the management of natural resources. This is

particularly true in the fisheries sector, which has long been dominated by men, whether the work is taking place in coastal communities, research organisations and projects or international decision-making. But the more time I spend working directly with women – whether it is the mangrove forests of Papua New Guinea or on Zoom calls with global delegates and policy makers – the more I realise that empowering women is not the biggest challenge or even the biggest opportunity. Women need to be systematically included, whether through quotas or policy. We need women to have a meaningful place in deciding the future of our resources.

Despite this focus on women's empowerment, environmental NGOs, intergovernmental bodies, grant makers and policy drivers continue to take a "check-list" approach to gender inclusion and gender mainstreaming instead of investing in meaningful engagement of women at every stage of the process and every level of a system. This dissonance is also reflected in the literature.

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Women attend a mangrove assessment training in Papua New Guinea. © Ruth Konia/TNC



In a literature review of 230 articles (James et al. 2021) relating to women and conservation or natural resource management we observed several key themes underscoring these inclusion gaps:

- a) Existing societal and cultural norms on gender expectations and roles affect and generally limit how women can engage in conservation and natural resource management.
- b) Women interact differently than men with the environment and natural resources. If they are excluded, women's unique knowledge and perspectives on particular resources may not be considered in conservation actions.
- c) There is often a lack of resources or dedicated effort by conservation or natural resource management programmes to understand and address the barriers that prevent women's engagement.

These themes have significant impact on environmental efforts around sustainable fisheries, marine protected areas and coastal community-based conservation.

In more than 50% of articles reviewed, it was noted that women often interact with, use, understand and value the environment differently than men and this labour is often undervalued or not even considered when designing policy, programmes and projects. In marine areas, for example, women commonly undertake inshore fishing, whereas

men often manage coastal and offshore fishing enterprises. Therefore, when women are not represented in fisheries decisions and deliberate efforts are not made to acknowledge and incorporate their knowledge, the resources they value are not considered in management planning. This has a devastating effect on women's livelihoods, safety and overall family well-being. In Tanzania, for example, one of the challenges facing women in the fisheries sector is the societal norms that expect women to carry out most household duties and childcare, leaving limited time for fishing. In addition, social taboos allow men to limit women's access to fisheries, for example prohibiting activities when women are menstruating, reducing women's overall opportunity to generate income (Bradford and Katikiro 2019).

These traditional gender roles are commonly reflected within conservation organisations themselves (Mahour 2016). For example, women often occupy interpretive, communicative and administrative roles (with a focus on so-called soft skills), while men are over-represented in positions that are more leadership-oriented and risk-taking or involve fieldwork (Westberg and Powell 2015; Jones and Solomon 2019). Furthermore, white men currently hold over 75% of CEO positions for international conservation organisations. This often leaves women performing lower status tasks, rather than playing the roles of scientific experts and decision-makers, which are more highly valued and more visible in these organisations (Westberg and Powell 2015; CohenMiller et al. 2020).



People in leadership and research positions have the power to influence which research questions are asked, which work is prioritised and how we include women. This is particularly relevant in fisheries, a sector dominated by men in terms of research and decision-making. In our literature review, we found that overwhelmingly women are driving research with a gender focus: 70 percent of articles relating to gender and conservation were led by women lead authors. In comparison, these statistics are flipped when we look at non-gender related fisheries research with men dominating all other fisheries publications. If women are not hired into research positions, gender intersections in conservation are less likely to be investigated, understood and ultimately addressed. For example, if we simply employ women in sustainable fisheries projects without understanding how money is distributed in the household, women may in fact work for money they have to give to others and then still have to find ways to feed their families.

Effective, long-lasting marine conservation and fisheries management requires us to involve women at every level of the system in research, policy, and project design. Meaningful engagement of women should be deliberate – and it needs to happen both within conservation organisations and in the programmes they execute on the ground. The challenges facing our planet, and particularly our marine ecosystems are urgent, important, and complex. We cannot afford to leave women behind.

## References

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