

MEDAC advice on gender equality

During the MEDAC FG on equal opportunities held on June 2025 the topic of the access to social protection and social security of women in fishery industry was addressed. The most updated data at European Union level are the following: fisheries industry employed 147 414 people in 2017 from which 3,78% were women. They were 5,4 % of those employed in Small Scale Fisheries, 1,9 % in Large Scale and 2,3% in Distant Water Fleet. At Mediterranean level, fisheries industry employed 32 742 people from which 3 056 were women in 2017 (9,3%). These women are working onboard of fisheries vessels as owners and crew. Greece is the Member state having the highest number with 1 900 women and Slovenia the lowest with only two recorded. (Social data in EU fisheries sector, STECF 2019).

The historically rooted perception of fishing as an activity reserved for men has been challenged by a dynamic reality in which an increasing number of women are emerging as key figures in the fisheries sector. The active participation of women at every stage of the seafood value chain is clear evidence of their crucial role, overcoming long-standing gender barriers.

Beyond fishing activities, women are also engaged in the management of fishing gear and marine resources. Their involvement in shaping fishing strategies and in the sustainable management of marine resources is essential to ensuring the long-term viability and prosperity of the sector. Female participation extends beyond operational roles to include administrative responsibilities as well. Women are increasingly present in decision-making positions, contributing to strategic planning, human resource management, and the definition of corporate policies.

In addition to traditional activities, women are actively involved in the commercialization of seafood products. The creation and management of complementary tourism activities, such as guided tours and gastronomic experiences, are examples of how women are reshaping the sector and contributing to the diversification of income sources.

Recognizing the role of women in fisheries is essential to building a more equitable and sustainable sector. The diversity of perspectives and skills that women bring represents a key asset in addressing the current and future challenges of the fisheries industry.

Promoting a more balanced image of the fisheries sector is essential to attract new generations of women interested in contributing to fisheries. Targeted awareness-raising initiatives and educational programmes are necessary to break down the gender stereotypes that still persist in society and within industry.

Despite their fundamental contribution, women in the fisheries sector often face a lack of adequate recognition for their work. The 2019 EU study, "Study of the role of women in fisheries in the

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Mediterranean and the Black Sea” revealed that 20% of women involved in the sector are engaged in unpaid work — a figure that is nearly double that of those employed in paid roles. This discrepancy highlights a broader structural issue affecting the sector and underscores the need for a thorough review of existing policies and practices.

The prevalence of unpaid work among women represents a significant barrier to the recognition of their contribution. Women are often engaged in support roles, making substantial contributions to daily operations without receiving appropriate remuneration. These roles may include administrative management, maintenance of equipment, and other essential tasks that frequently go unnoticed.

Sectoral organizations play a crucial role in promoting policies that ensure fair recognition of women’s work. Collaboration with institutions, governmental and non-governmental organizations is essential to foster an environment that promotes gender equality and addresses disparities in pay and recognition.

The lack of recognition of women’s work in the fisheries sector is a systemic issue that requires concrete action. Only through more inclusive policies and practices, accompanied by a cultural shift, it will be possible to ensure that women receive proper recognition for their essential contribution to the fisheries sector.

Gender equality and equal opportunities in fisheries sector, as in other jobs, depends on several key principles including access to employment, equal pay, social protection, health care, old-age pensions. However, these principles are embedded in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EU Council and Parliament, 2017) and further reinforced by the *Action Plan for a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions* published by the European Commission in 2021, which aims to implement this pillar. Together, they set out the core principles for fair, modern labour markets and welfare systems in Europe, reaffirming existing rights and establishing new objectives to address current challenges. Implementation mainly lies with Member States, with the EU providing support. It is within this context that European Commission may support Member States to introduce more gender equality and opportunities in fisheries sector and facilitate the access of women to the work on board of fishing vessels. Improvement of working conditions onboard of fishing vessels is key to women employment in the fisheries sector.

The international conventions aiming the improvement of working environment for all crew members (women and men) and of social benefits should be accounted for into the EU strategies related to gender equality. The C188 *Work in Fishing* convention of ILO (2007) is one of them.

The MEDAC deems that the ratification and effective implementation of this Convention into national legislation, as supported by the Council directive (EU) 2017/159, is crucial for gender equality and improved working conditions in fisheries industry. For example, in France, where the convention is practically implemented into the national law through national bylaws, significant progresses are observed due to more gender sensitive policies. Gender sensitive policies identify

first the barriers faced by women working in the fisheries sector and then search how to address them.

As an example, pregnancy was identified in France as one of the main regulatory barriers regarding women employment and gender equality in fisheries. Fisheries is viewed as a high-risk activity by the French social security system and as soon women declare pregnancy (second or third month) they must stop their activity onboard due to the dangerousness of the work and have to be on sick-leaves until the maternity leaves start. However, sick-leave financial indemnity is lesser than maternity leave. As a consequence, their income is considerably decreased during seven or 12 months. The payment on share system is representing the second difficulty for women because during maternity or sick leaves they are unable to contribute to the pension scheme which is based on the income of the workers. This means that this long period is not counted towards women retirement entitlement. As soon as these barriers were identified, national authorities acted to address the pension contribution gap. The discrepancy in sick-leave pay remains under discussion.

In Spain, on 22 November 2024, the Andalusian government published Law 5/2024 of 13 November on the Statute of Rural and Maritime Women in Andalusia, which recognises the rights of women in the agricultural, agri-food and fisheries sectors and promotes actions to eliminate discrimination and gender gaps in these sectors. It also promotes their professional recognition, enhancing their social standing and guaranteeing the effective exercise of their professional, social, economic and political rights. The Statute sets out the measures necessary to achieve equal treatment and opportunities for women and men in the agricultural and fisheries sectors, as well as to incorporate the gender perspective in all areas of the sector, taking into account the different conditions and needs of women and men. With this Statute, Andalusia is also anticipating the recommendation contained in the European Parliament's Motion for a Resolution on women and their role in rural areas (2016/2204(INI)), which states the advisability of drawing up a statute for rural women at European level.

The MEDAC underlines that the Government of Andalusia has been a pioneer in this regard.

The Spanish Network of Women in the Fisheries Sector, promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA) through the General Secretariat for Fisheries, aims to promote the role of women in the fisheries sector, as well as the formation of associations, communication and the exchange of initiatives and best practices amongst women who work or wish to work in the fisheries sector, in any of its various areas. <https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/pesca/temas/red-mujeres>

The existence of the National Association of Women in Fisheries (ANMUPESCA), a non-profit state organisation representing associations and professionals across the entire fisheries and maritime sector, with a presence in Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, the Basque Country, the Valencian Community, Andalusia and Madrid, and a membership base of approximately 15,000 women (member of the MEDAC). It receives subsidised support from the Institute for Women (IMIO) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA) for the development of initiatives aimed at equality, training, strengthening associations, raising the profile of women and their participation in the governance of the sector. <https://www.anmupesca.org/asociacion/>



The Andalusian Association of Women in the Fisheries Sector (AndMuPes) is a non-profit organisation operating at a regional level, representing women in the fisheries and aquaculture sector of the autonomous community of Andalusia (member of the MEDAC). Its main objective is to defend the economic, social and professional interests of all its members (more than 300 women) and to encourage the integration of more women into this sector, which remains heavily male-dominated. This association receives ongoing support from the Regional Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development of the Regional Government of Andalusia. And since June 2023, it has been responsible for coordinating the MEDAC's Equal Opportunities Focus Group. <https://www.andmupes.org/>

Fishing enterprises **in Italy** are largely family-run businesses in which men are engaged at sea for most of the week, while women — relatives of the fisherman — carry out the necessary activities on land. These include the marketing of the catch, administrative management, handling of bureaucratic procedures, relations with suppliers, as well as interactions with shipyards, service cooperatives and port authorities. The work performed by these women is essential for the economic sustainability of such enterprises.

Women's presence in the fisheries sector also includes approximately thousand women working on board vessels in various roles, as well as women employed in cooperatives, fish markets, trade unions and marine biology. Within this broad female workforce, in Italy and in only a few other Mediterranean European countries (such as Greece and Cyprus), the group that lacks a clearly defined legal status is that of women working within family fishing businesses. They support onshore activities which, together with those carried out at sea by men, form the fishing enterprise, yet they are still often considered as housewives.

The absence of economic and social recognition represents a significant barrier to the dynamism of the sector. In many cases, these women are daughters of fishermen who have completed secondary education — and sometimes even university studies — before returning to work within the family business, where they now represent a bridge between tradition and innovation.

Directive 2010/41/EU on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in self-employed activities applies not only to self-employed workers but also to spouses of self-employed workers — or, where recognized under national law, cohabiting partners — who are neither employees nor partners, but who habitually participate in the activity of the self-employed worker, performing identical or complementary tasks.

Article 7 of the Directive provides that, *“where a system for social protection for self-employed workers exists in a Member State, that Member State shall take the necessary measures to ensure that spouses and life partners referred to in Article 2(b) can benefit from a social protection in accordance with national law”*. Article 8 further requires that *“the Member States shall take the necessary measures to ensure that female self-employed workers and female spouses and life partners referred to in Article 2 may, in accordance with national law, be granted a sufficient maternity allowance enabling interruptions in their occupational activity owing to pregnancy or motherhood for at least 14 weeks”*.





This Directive was further addressed in the 2014 European Parliament Resolution (2013/2150/INI) on specific measures within the Common Fisheries Policy to enhance the role of women, which reaffirmed the importance of recognizing the status of collaborators in family fishing enterprises for all women involved in managing family fishing activities.

Italy has transposed the Directive into national law (Legislative Decree No. 151/2012), introducing maternity benefits for self-employed women in small-scale marine and inland fisheries. However, it has not fully implemented the provisions concerning spouses and cohabiting partners.

Article 230-bis of the Italian Civil Code regulates family businesses. Under this framework, spouses, relatives up to the third degree and in-laws up to the second degree may continuously collaborate in the business based on a specific agreement or contract. Family collaborators are entitled to maintenance within the family, to participate in profits (up to a maximum of 49%), and to share in assets acquired and business growth, in proportion to the quality and quantity of their work.

Nevertheless, the definition and formal recognition of women in fisheries as “assisting collaborators in family fishing enterprises” is still lacking, particularly when they carry out support activities on land. Such recognition would ensure appropriate economic and social protections.

However, the major constraint toward gender equality in fisheries is the persistence of gender stereotypes within the fisheries sector and that is observed in all Member states. Common examples include the belief that “physically demanding activities such as fishing are impossible for women” or that “women should work near their homes to look after their families” (Frangoudes et al. The role of women in the sustainable development of European Fisheries Areas, EP 2008, 2013, Role of Women in Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, EU, 2018). Such stereotypes have shaped not only the industry itself but also the vocational training centers and maritime schools (where they are available) that provide the mandatory initial training required to become a fisher. Such type of stereotypes is expressed also during fishing trips through discriminatory jokes from male colleagues. They probably also play a role in the lack of gender sensitivity of the regulatory framework.

MEDAC deems appropriate that addressing these stereotypes is essential if women are to gain fair access to the fisheries labour market and be protected from discrimination both during training and on-board vessels. Creation of national observatories on harassment within the fisheries sector, as well as for other navies, would be a valuable step for Member states to promote safe working environments and support the employment of women and young people in the industry. This should be supported and monitored from European Union.

Another barrier to gender equality in fishing is the lack of basic facilities such as toilets and showers on fishing vessels or separate dormitories on large vessels. This discourages women from joining the crew of fishing vessels. It may be impossible to install such amenities on all EU vessels, particularly when they are too small or too old. But new vessels are needed to attract women to the industry as they represent a potential workforce. Better facilities and conditions on board could also encourage young people to join the industry.





Regarding the unpaid labour of assisting spouses and life partners, more than 15 years after the adoption of Directive 2010/41/EU, revising Directive 1986/613/EEC, on equal treatment for self-employed women and men, the MEDAC recommends for European Union to assess where implementation has been effective and how it has evolved. The status offers social rights to spouses/partners contributing unpaid work to family businesses. For example, in France, where the initial directive was implemented in 1998, access to retire pension, vocational training, and representation in fisheries organisations became possible. However, the French law regarding the directive was revised recently (2022) and the status of assisting spouse or partner is now limited to five years. After this period, assisting spouses should opt for a worker or family business associate status to maintain these benefits. Although not perfect, where applied, the status helps make assisting spouses and partners work visible. Monitoring the implementation by Members states of the directive 2010/41/EU is essential to avoid that assisting spouses and partners labour is not turned back to invisibility.

The future of women's participation in the fisheries sector is rich with opportunities and promises. By ensuring equal opportunities, recognizing the added value of women, enhancing their contribution across the value chain, and encouraging innovative solutions, the fisheries sector can thrive and become a model of equity and sustainability for future generations.

In order for the fisheries sector to fully benefit from women's skills and expertise, systemic measures are needed to promote inclusion and to value their contribution. Encouraging the creation and strengthening of associations and networks of women entrepreneurs in fisheries represents a crucial step in building an environment where women can share experiences, knowledge and opportunities.

Investing in training is essential to improve the quality of women's participation across the fisheries value chain. Targeted training programmes should be developed to provide women with the skills needed to effectively perform their roles within the sector. These programmes should cover a wide range of topics, from business administration to the sustainable management of fisheries resources.

Women engaged in small-scale fisheries require particular attention in order to ensure their protection and safety. Appropriate regulatory and practical measures must be implemented to guarantee adequate rights and to protect them from specific occupational risks associated with working on board fishing vessels.

