

The 9th Global Conference on Gender in Aquaculture & Fisheries  
*Transforming Aquaculture and Fisheries for Gender Justice*

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# Counting the Uncounted:

Gendered Labour in Australia's Northern  
Territory Commercial Seafood Industry

By:

Nilanjana Biswas,

PhD Candidate

Charles Darwin University

Photo credit: Library & Archives NT





# Research Aim & Questions

Map courtesy: Pablo Arriaga Velasco Aceves

Develop a historical understanding of women's participation in the commercial seafood sector of Australia's Northern Territory

## Question 1

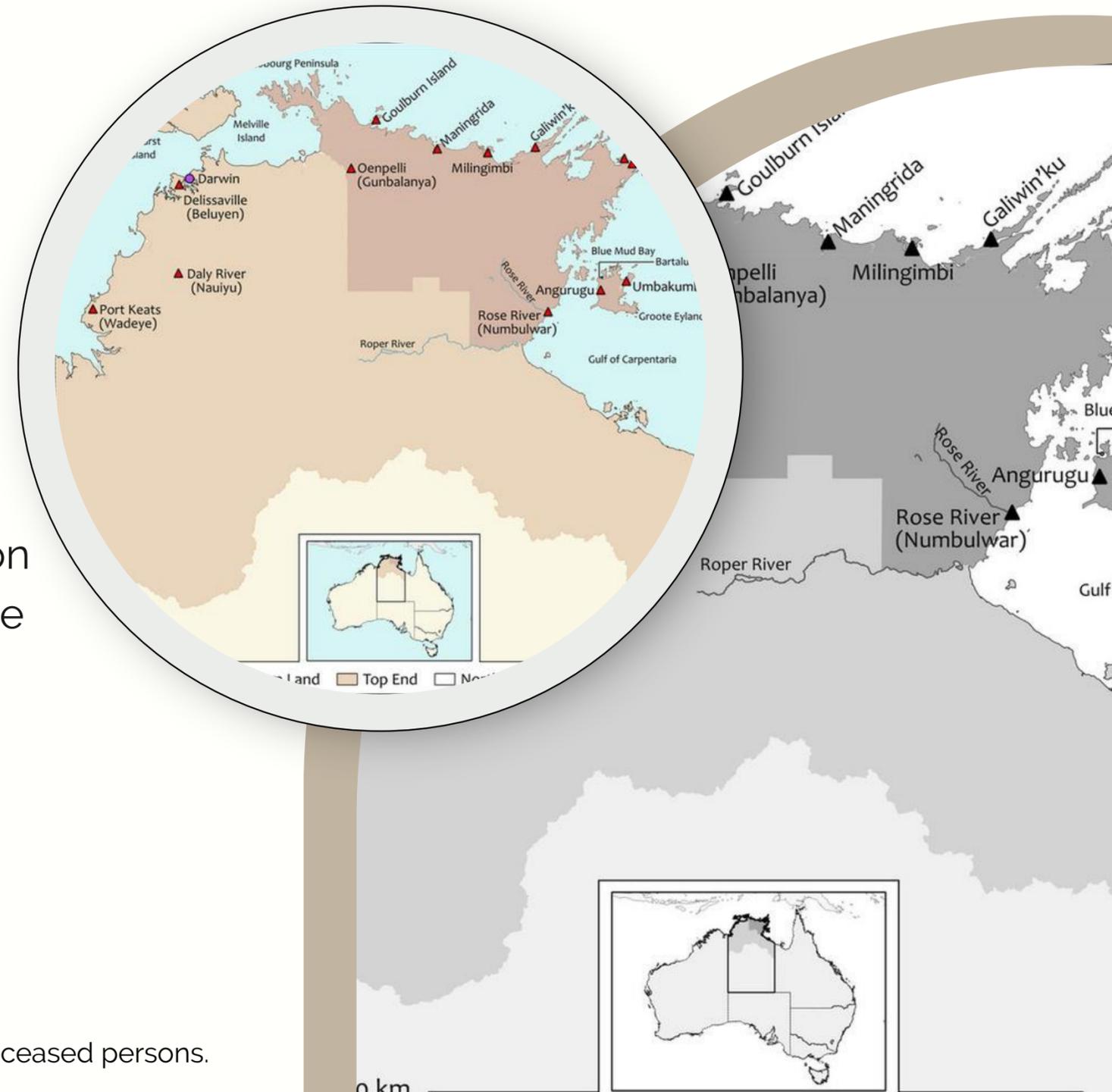
What roles did women play in the seafood sector and how did these change over time?

## Question 2

Who were the key stakeholders in the sector; how did their roles change with time; with what impact on women's engagement?

## Question 3

What impact did commercialization of the sector have on women's engagement?



# The Northern Territory (NT) Seafood Sector & Workforce

- Underdeveloped region
- ~30.8% of total population is Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander, and poor <sup>1</sup>
- Commercial seafoods is primarily export-oriented <sup>2</sup>
- Low value addition <sup>2</sup>
- Ageing workforce <sup>2</sup>
- Reliance on casual/contractual work arrangements <sup>2</sup>



22-24%  
women <sup>3,4</sup>

3%  
Aboriginal <sup>2</sup>

Recommendations  
suggest processing  
sector expansion <sup>2,5</sup>



# Social Provisioning-based<sup>6</sup> Conceptual Framework

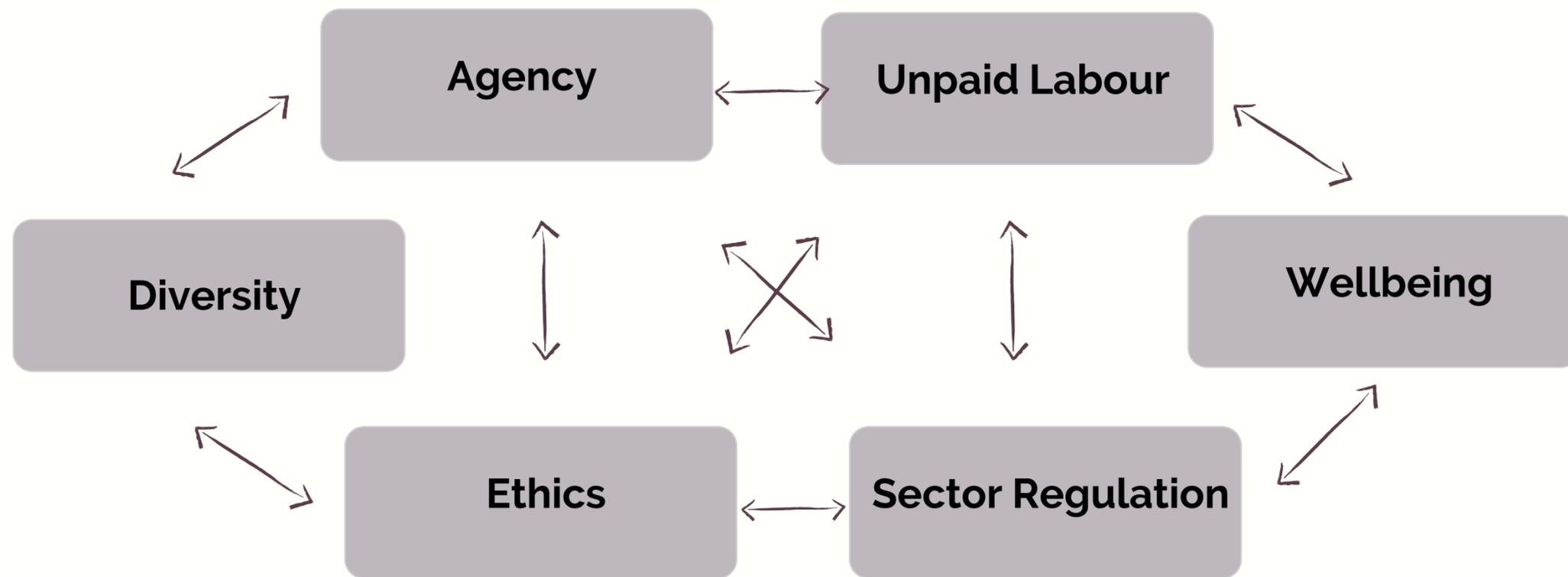


Photo Credit: Alan Fidock Collection, with kind permission from Dr Bentley James

# Methodology



## Phases in NT Seafood Sector Growth

1

1950 - late 60s

- Organization

2

1970 - late 80s

Capitalization

3

1990 - late 90s

- Regulation

4

2000 onwards

- Negotiation



## 07

## Organization (1950 - late 60s)

- Small-scale fisheries organized by Mission-led Aboriginal labour
- Gendered division of work; exceptions at a few missions (Galiwin'ku & Milingimbi)
- Aboriginal fish production equaled or exceeded commercial sector but labelled "subsistence" and unwaged/under-waged
- Wage disparities reinforced racial and gender hierarchies



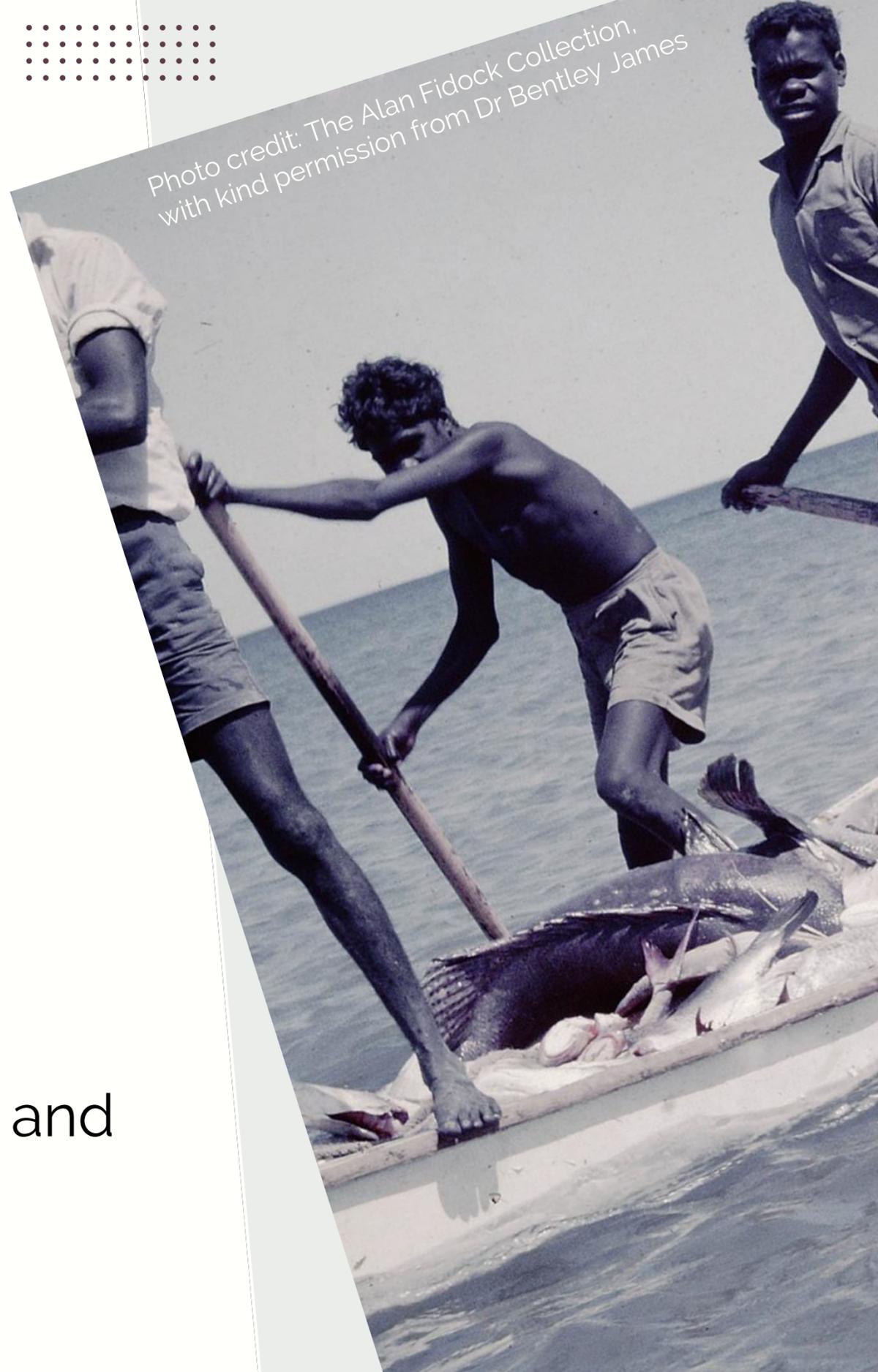


Photo credit: The Alan Fidock Collection, with kind permission from Dr Bentley James

## Wages<sup>8</sup> & Bottom Line



Bottom line: Fisheries built on a legacy of racial, gender, and labour exploitation



Photo credit: Library & Archives NT

- NPF launched under “Develop the North” initiative<sup>9</sup>
- Shore-based prawn factories set up in regional locations: Groote Eyelandt and Darwin
- Aboriginal + white, female, fly-in-fly-out workforce employed in prawn processing with wage parity<sup>10</sup>
- Women join trawlers as deckhands, cooks, radio operators
- Surge in trawler numbers (more than 300)
- Growth of capital-intensive freezer trawlers with onboard processing



## Regulation (1990 - late 90s)

- Overcapacity triggers tighter regulation & fleet reduction<sup>12</sup>
- Policy shifts from development to efficiency (bioeconomic fisheries management models)<sup>13</sup>
- Shore-based processing factories close: women workers (Aboriginal and white) lose jobs
- Informalization of women's labour
- Industry consolidates → male-dominated, non-Indigenous

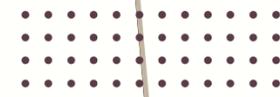


Photo credit: Australian Professional Fisherman, via Facebook (Public Post), 2021



# Negotiation (2000 onwards)

- Quotas and bioeconomic focus on profit + sustainability; social dimensions overlooked<sup>12</sup>
- 2008 Blue Mud Bay ruling: Aboriginal rights to intertidal land affirmed; leads to protracted negotiations<sup>13</sup>
- Women: ~24% of workforce (2023)<sup>3,4</sup>, but very few in core industry roles (harvest/postharvest)
- Leadership: More gender equity in government; industry remains male-dominated
- Structural barriers: Extractivist fisheries model, limited local value-add, complex licensing



Photo credit: The Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF)



## Past choices

Women's roles were profoundly reshaped by policy shifts

Social provisioning sees the sector as a community process, disembedded by bio-economic management.

Factory closures/consolidation erased women's jobs, deepened inequality

## Present realities

Women visible in admin/regulation, but excluded from core value creation (harvest/postharvest)

Aboriginal women's foundational contributions remain undervalued

## Future opportunities

Retain value through processing; embed inclusive policies

Gender-disaggregated data is essential for equity and sustainability

## Key takeaway

Women built the sector's past; with the right choices, they can build its future.



Photo credit: Northern Territory Seafood Council (NTSC)  
Women in Seafood Australasia (WISA)

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# THANK YOU!

Contact information:

Nilanjana Biswas

Email: [nilanjana.biswas@cdu.edu.au](mailto:nilanjana.biswas@cdu.edu.au)

Researcher page: <https://researchers.cdu.edu.au/en/persons/nilanjana-biswas>



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