

# Gender Dynamics and Women's Empowerment Challenges in Peru Freshwater Fisheries

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## Research overview

- GAF consultancy for The Nature Conservancy: to examine the status of gender equity in freshwater fisheries.
- Research question for the gender analysis in freshwater fisheries in Peru: **What is the current status of gender equity in Peru's freshwater fisheries, considering women's roles and activities, their access to and control over fisheries resources, the prevailing social and cultural norms, and existing gaps in data, and how do these factors shape the unique challenges and opportunities for gender equity in the sector?**
- Desk review based on published and grey literature was undertaken to identify existing information on freshwater fisheries and conservation with gender considerations.

# Inland freshwater fisheries in Peru



## Inland freshwater fisheries in Peru

- Geographic scope: 3,247 inland fishing villages; 90% of production from 6 rivers (Ucayali & Amazonas most important).
- Production: Inland fisheries = 5% of small-scale catch (2014); 92% of this from Amazon Basin.
- Data gaps: Underestimation due to limited monitoring and exclusion of artisanal/subsistence fisheries.
- Commercial fisheries: Small-scale fishers dominate; women strongly involved in ornamental fishing (extraction → commercialization, leadership in guilds).
- Subsistence fisheries: Key source of protein and household food security; women's fishing framed as domestic duty, men dominate sales.

## Women and men inland fishers in Peru

- Official gender-disaggregated data



### Primer Censo Nacional de Pesca Continental 2013

- Counting women and men:
  - Total Registered Fishers (Peru): 76,285 (42% inland).
  - Women's Participation: inland sector male-dominated (86%); 14% women inland fishers.
  - Inland Census Data: 27,171 men vs. 4,445 women (plus 46 women in fishing & aquaculture).

## Women and men inland fishers in Peru

- Where do women and men fish?
  - Community-Based: Most inland fishing occurs within community boundaries.
  - River Preference: ~65% of women fish in rivers; men also favor rivers.
  - Secondary Sites: Women → streams; Men → *cochas*
- Fishing tools and roles are gendered—women fish near home, join in poison fishing, and support catches through preparation and net repair (in central Amazon: women and children use traps, hooks vs. men use larger-scale techniques)
- Educational Gap: Male fishers reach secondary education more often (46%) than women (34%); most women remain at primary level. Limited access to schooling compounded by high teenage pregnancy rates, especially among Indigenous Amazonian women.
- Social and economic vulnerability:
  - 87% of inland fishers lack permits; only 1% of women have life/pension insurance. High informality obscures participation and reinforces vulnerability, especially for women.
  - Most fishers motivated by necessity, earn low incomes (≈\$200–400/month), and rely on extra activities (agriculture, livestock). Women face greater barriers to credit and financing due to informality and exclusion from support programs.

## Gender roles and dynamics

- Most studies emphasize men's role in extractive fishing, undervaluing women's contributions in preparation, processing, and commercialization. In the context of fishing communities, women activities are perceived as extensions of their domestic responsibilities (WCS, 2021).
- In the Amazonian region, early school dropout rates are high among youth, as many leave school to participate in family fishing activities (Villanueva & Flores-Nava, 2019). Girls learn fishing in childhood, but puberty brings a shift toward domestic roles (cooking, childcare, household tasks).
- Clear gendered division of labor: Men: fishing in distant areas, hunting, chacra farming/ Women: provisioning households, small-scale fishing near home, food preparation, net repair, and market sales.
- Women step into male roles (fishing, chacra management) when men migrate; also key in local markets and as "information gatherers" shaping social and economic networks (info on species demand)
- Seasonal shifts: men fish in rainy season; both genders farm in dry season, with women often carrying dual/triple roles.

## Cultural beliefs, gender and fishing

- Fishing framed as a masculine domain, reinforced by cultural beliefs and superstitions.
- Belief that women's presence "sours" fishing success, tied to views of sea/streams as feminine, jealous entities (WCS, 2011).
- Gender roles seen as parallel but hierarchical, shaped by rituals linked to menstruation, fertility, and reproduction (WCS, 2021).
- Women often excluded from fishing during pregnancy or menstruation, seen as dangerous or disruptive.
- Ethnic beliefs portray rivers/forests as spiritually dangerous, restricting women's access to resource spaces.
- Specific practices (e.g., poison fishing) ban pregnant women, fearing their "humor" neutralizes effectiveness (Espinosa, 2009; Espinosa, 2010).

## Control of resources and household strategies

- **Unequal Control of Resources:** Men seen as main providers with authority over farming, fishing, and income; women contribute heavily (processing, selling, subsistence fishing) but often lack recognition and decision-making power (WCS, 2011; Molero, 2011).
- **Context-Dependent Dynamics:** Gender roles vary by region—some communities reinforce male dominance over income, while others (e.g., Pucallpa) see women gain influence through commercialization and market work (Espinosa, 2010).

# Challenges in fisheries governance

- Peru's general fisheries law (nº25977) ignores gender differences, focusing only on extraction and overlooking women's vital roles in processing, trade, and household support.
- Only 9% of women fishers participate in an organization (CENPAC, 2013). Men –involve in the extractive phase- dominate guilds and associations. Women's work in pre- and post-capture phases is undervalued, limiting access to cooperatives, and their participation in decision-making processes.
- Despite their low participation in governance decisions, the literature review reveal multiple local experiences about women's leadership in fishing or in defending fish and water resources. Environmental crisis have been pushing women –mostly indigenous women- to organise. However, these experiences have not yet been systematized, and the limited available information is found mainly in media reports.

## Conclusion

- Gender inequities persist in Peru's freshwater fisheries: women's contributions are undervalued, their access to resources limited, and their roles shaped by restrictive cultural beliefs.
- Context (regions) matters: while some regions reinforce male dominance, others show women gaining agency through market work and commercialization.
- Governance gaps: fisheries law and organizations largely overlook women's roles, restricting their participation in decision-making and cooperatives.
- Emerging leadership: despite barriers, women—especially Indigenous women—have shown resilience and leadership in defending fish and water resources.



Source: Landolt, G. (2005). El ojo que cuenta: Mitos y costumbres de la Amazonía indígena ilustrados por su gente .  
[Eyes that tell: Myths and customs from indigenous Amazonia illustrated by its people]. IKAM.

# Thank you!