

The Republic of Mauritius

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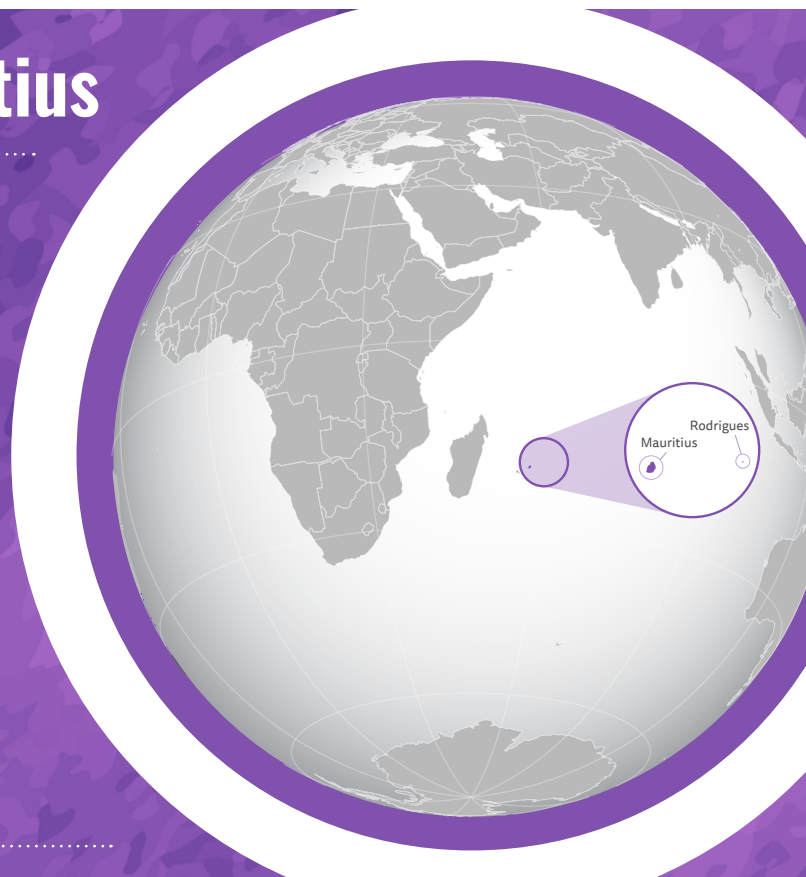
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The Republic of Mauritius is economically dependent on viable ocean ecosystems. Seafood production is a key component of its economy and women are a critical, yet poorly acknowledged category of workers across relevant value chains. Important political progress has been made to empower women, with documented positive, concrete examples of how to effectively do so. However, significant gaps remain to achieve gender-related sustainable development commitments.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of capture fisheries production in Mauritius, with a focus on gender dimensions, highlighting opportunities to strengthen gender equity and women's empowerment in the sector and beyond. It is part of a series meant to offer development agency employees, government agencies, NGOs, funders and researchers with a snapshot of gender and fisheries to inform the planning and delivery of relevant activities these actors might be involved in, or are in the process of developing.

Fisheries production

Total annual fish production reported by the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development stood at 35,055 tonnes in 2019 and 22,943 tonnes in 2020.¹ These statistics reflect total catches by the Mauritian fleet.

The Sea Around Us estimated total annual marine capture production for the fleets of Mauritius as follows²:

- ▶ Marine subsistence (2019) – 1,593 tonnes
- ▶ Marine commercial (2019) – 4,170 tonnes (artisanal) and 27,314 tonnes (industrial; of which 2,213 tonnes were caught within the waters of Exclusive Economic Zones and 25,100 tonnes on the high seas.)

Fish consumption

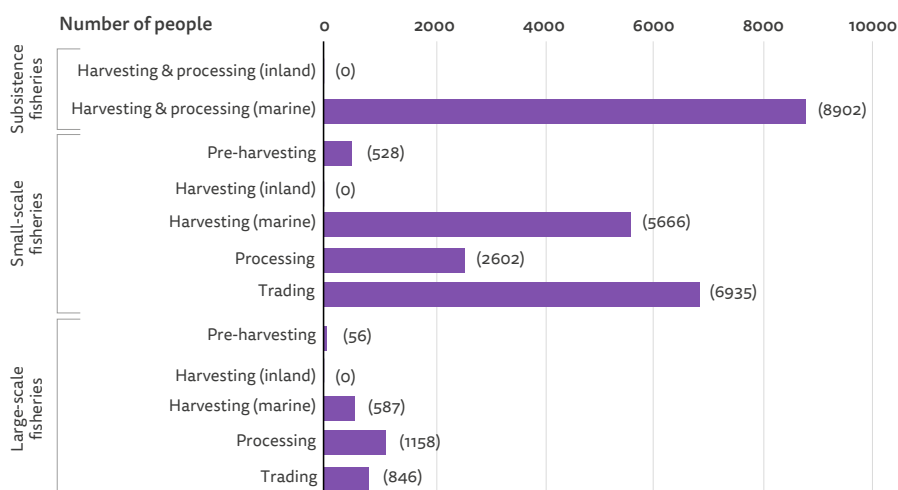
The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated apparent consumption at 23.1 kg per capita per year (2019).^{3,4} A survey conducted in both urban and rural areas across 21 localities around Mauritius in 2013 also found that respondents, on average, consumed 23.1kg of fresh and frozen fish and 16.8kg of other fishery products per year.⁵

Economic contribution to GDP

The fisheries sector contributed about 1% to national GDP between 2016 and 2019.^{6,7} For those same years, the sector accounted for 17.6% and 19% of export earnings, respectively.^{6,7}

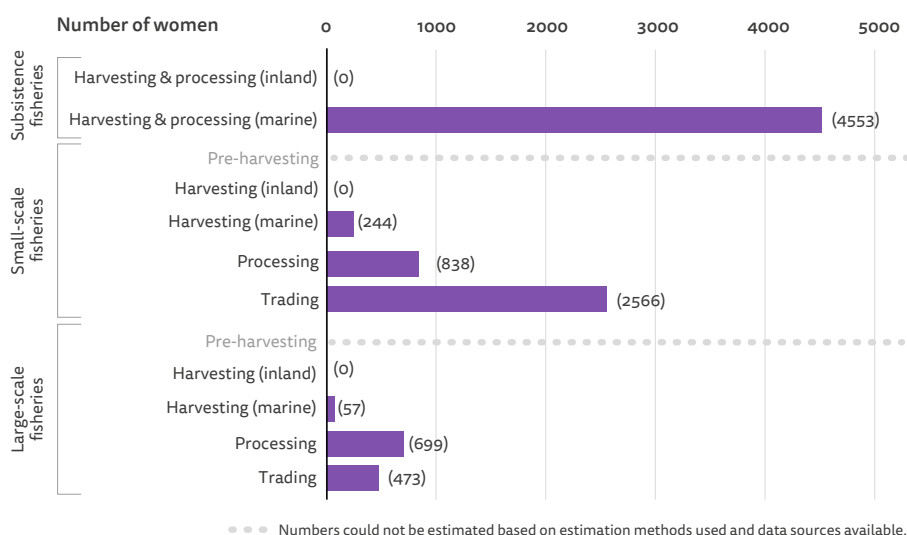
Employment (all)

The Illuminating Hidden Harvests initiative estimated 27,280 individuals employed in the fisheries sector, including pre- and post-harvest sector activities (2022), and subsistence fishing (see graph below).⁸ This estimate is higher than previous estimates of between 11,000 and 22,000⁶ individuals employed in the sector.⁷

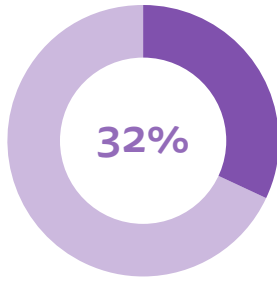


Employment (women)

The Illuminating Hidden Harvests initiative estimated that a total of 9,430 women engage in the fishery sector through subsistence fishing as well as pre- and post-harvest activities.



Women who fish mostly engage in gleaning activities, although some do practice line and cage fishing.⁹ Gleaning, often practiced for subsistence by walking along the coastline and reef without the need for specialised fishing gear, is considered an invisible profession as women are part of the informal sector and therefore not acknowledged as an integral part of the system.¹¹ Of the 1,902 registered fishers in Mauritius island, only 35 are women.¹² Many women are also involved in activities such as fisheries-related



Percentage of registered fishers operating in the lagoon areas on Rodrigues that are women

logistics, maintenance and/or cleaning, which tend to fall under household duties and subsistence, and they get less direct financial support than registered fishermen.¹³ In several instances, where fisheries aid is or has been provided to fishers, only registered fishers benefit automatically from government schemes, such as “bad weather allowance”, compensation during lagoon closures due to COVID-19 and the resulting oil spill from the bulk carrier Wakashio running aground on a coral reef in July 2020.^{11,14,15} Thus, given their low representation in the formal sector, women lack recognition for their contributions. They are underrepresented in fisheries management and decision making, which can result in difficulty to access resources (i.e., technical; financial, such as loans and compensation; and infrastructure, such as boat access to fish further at sea) that would allow them to realise the benefits of their involvement in the fisheries sector.

Participation by women in fisheries is much higher on Rodrigues, the autonomous outer island of the Republic of Mauritius. Large lagoon areas around Rodrigues make it easier for women to engage in gleaning activities, and in the 1980s, the Mauritian government’s Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare further facilitated women’s fishing activities and supported their financial independence by issuing them with boats (as well as lifejackets and engines in some places).¹⁶ Around 32% of the total number of registered fishers operating in the lagoon areas on Rodrigues are women, giving them more legitimacy to contribute to participatory discussions about fisheries and to rightful compensation.¹¹ The much higher dependence by the population on fisheries and the higher involvement of women, particularly as octopus fishers,^{17,18} has translated into greater participation by women in management on Rodrigues compared to Mauritius island.

Social considerations

Literacy (90.3% in 2022) and enrollment rates from primary to tertiary education are high for women in Mauritius.¹⁹ Yet, these high achievements in schooling are not carrying over to employment opportunities.

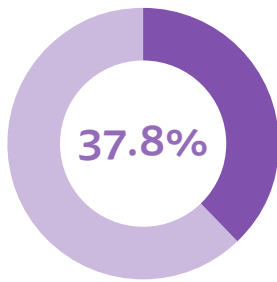
The national averages for gender distribution in employment overall for 2019 were unbalanced, with the employed population comprising 62% males and 38% females.²⁰ Forty-seven percent of those considered unemployed were women in 2021.²¹ In addition, women are paid on average less per hour than men, with a gender pay gap of 23-30% existing across occupational levels.^{22,23} Currently, 11% of the poorer segment of the population constitutes women living under the poverty line, compared to 9.6% males in the same category.²⁴

The division of labour within households is strongly gendered, with women assigned reproductive and nurturing roles within their families and across all sections of society - a role they are expected to play in addition to production and community roles.^{22,25}

Women’s rights and political empowerment

While Mauritius is considered one of the most democratic countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, women’s representation in politics is among the lowest in the region. The proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments stood at 20% in 2022; placing Mauritius at 115 out of 187 countries.^{26,27} Mauritius has not adopted affirmative action policies to increase women’s presence in Parliament, as has been done in several other African contexts.²⁸

Conservative norms and values associated with an entrenched patriarchal culture together with a focus on ethnic and religious political



Percentage of women in senior positions in government services in 2021

representation have led to the continued marginalization of women in politics.²⁵ Of the 23 current cabinet members, only three are women, including the Vice Prime Minister (who also serves as the Minister of Education, Science and Technology) and the Minister of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity. The proportion of women in the most senior positions in government services (i.e., Senior Chief Executive, Permanent Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Director, Manager, Judge and Magistrate) was 37.8% in 2021.²¹ The recent support provided by UNDP to the Mauritius National Assembly to establish a Gender Information System and an online self-paced e-learning gender mainstreaming course should assist in building the capacity of members of Parliament and gender focal points at sectoral Ministries to strengthen their capacity to address gender equality and equity objectives.²⁹

At a local level, Mauritius adopted the 'New Local Government Act 2011' that introduced a gender-neutral quota whereby a minimum of one-third of either sex must be represented in municipalities and village councils starting in January 2012. This legal provision resulted in significant increases of women in local government. However, cultural and traditional attitudes, as well as policies that prevent or limit women's participation remain largely unchanged and political representation of women at the national level remains low (see above).^{26,30}

In 2005, to underline its commitment to gender equality, the government set up the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare. Using the National Gender Policy Framework (2008) launched by this Ministry as the guiding document, the government implements policies and programmes for promoting women's empowerment and gender equality across line ministries and public institutions at both policy and programmatic level.³¹ A National Steering Committee on Gender Mainstreaming was set up in 2010 to allow gender focal points across all ministries to discuss gender-related dimensions in their respective sectors. Gender considerations at all levels of policymaking and implementation were also introduced in the budget speech of 2018/19 and included a chapter on gender mainstreaming in the three-year Rolling Strategic Plan. In May 2022, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare presented the Gender Country Profile (GCP) for the period 2021-2027, which encompassed an updated sector-wide (e.g., agriculture, construction, mining) gender gap analysis in line with the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III.³² A draft Gender Equality Bill developed with the support of the European Union is still pending adoption.

A 2011 amendment to the Equal Opportunities Act led to the establishment of an Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) in 2012 with the key goal to eliminate discrimination in all sectors, as well as to promote good relations between people of different status. The EOC safeguards and protects the rights of all citizens, including women and girls.³³

There are clear intentions to empower women in the agricultural sector, which includes fisheries, but these are not necessarily clearly articulated in the context of the ocean economy. Important next steps would be to address issues of empowerment, ownership, access, control and utilisation of natural resources (including ocean/marine). As summarized by UN Women, "...many areas – such as gender and poverty, women's access to assets, and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Closing these gender data gaps is essential for achieving gender-related SDG commitments in Mauritius."²⁶

Key frameworks promoting gender equality and their ratification status³⁴

- ✓ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ratified in 1984 and Optional Protocol ratified in 2008.
- ✓ Numerous agencies are involved in implementing the provisions of CEDAW, including the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare, together with the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up (NMRF) as well as other agencies such as the National Women’s Council, the National Women Entrepreneur Council, the National Human Rights Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Office of the Ombudsman and Ombudsperson for Children.³⁵ The most recent review was done in 2018 and included specific requests for: enacting a gender equality bill and ensuring it includes a provision on temporary special measures; amending or adopting legislation to explicitly prohibit marital rape; strengthening data collection systems for disaggregated data necessary for measuring progress on the realization of substantive equality between women and men in all areas covered by the Convention, especially child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, education, employment, women in prostitution and trafficking.³⁶
- ✓ Beijing Platform for Action (1995) with national reviews submitted for the 2014-2019 period.³⁷
- ✓ Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) ratified in 2017.
- ✗ SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. Mauritius remains the only country (among 16 member states) that has not signed the Southern African Development Community Protocol.

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

Mauritius was not given an overall value or rank in the 2014, 2019 or 2023 SIGI due to missing data for some of the categories included under SIGI.³⁸

Year	Value (Category)	Discrimination in the family	Restricted physical integrity	Restricted access to productive & financial resources	Restricted civil liberties
2014 ³⁹	n.a.	0.1998 (Low)	0.3151 (Med.)	0 (v. Low)	0.2812 (Low)
2019	n.a.	0.53 (High)	n.a.	0.19 (Low)	0.41 (Med.)
2023	n.a.	0.471	n.a.	0.061	0.374

Africa Gender Index (AGI)

Value (2019)⁴⁰

0.455

(on a scale from 0 to 1, with a score of 1 representing parity between women and men)

Rank (2019)

27

(out of 51 countries)

Gender Inequality Index (GII)

Value (2021)⁴¹

0.347

(on a scale from 0, where women and men fare equally, to 1 - where one gender fares as poorly as possible in all measured dimensions)

Global Rank (2021)

82

(out of 170 countries)

Women in fisheries governance

The Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare has a Gender Unit that serves as the National Gender Machinery (NGM) and the lead agency responsible for national-level oversight, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of gender mainstreaming policies, strategies and programmes.

Mauritius adopted a rights-based National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF) in 2008, promoting decentralised, context-specific, participatory local development and social mobilisation to mainstream gender and achieve gender-responsive social transformation across all sectors⁴². The Rodrigues Regional Assembly has developed its Gender Policy, as required by the NGPF. It highlights how women's livelihoods have become vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation and need to be a key focus of policy and planning measures.⁴³ The Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping has also formulated a gender policy document with the goal of promoting gender equality across the Ministry by identifying existing gaps, proposing strategic interventions, and formulating policy recommendations.

Yet, of seventeen fisheries-related legislative texts reviewed (see table below), only two mention women and gender. These mentions are rather brief, with no clear strategies or objectives of gender mainstreaming or women's empowerment, although it does demarcate some level of recognition of the importance of gender and its connection to fisheries. For instance, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the Republic of Mauritius notes that "octopus fishing is very important, especially for women fishers."

The National Climate Change Adaptation Policy Framework recognizes gender and health as cross-cutting issues with water, agriculture, fisheries, and coastal management. Gender is not core to the policy principle, yet it is noted as "relevant and addressed throughout."

Women in fisheries governance

Governance Text	Year
<i>Fisheries Act</i>	1980
<i>Fisheries Regulations</i>	1983
<i>Environment Protection Act</i>	1991
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources Act</i>	1998
<i>Fishermen Welfare Fund Act</i>	2000
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Marine Protected Areas) Regulations</i>	2001
<i>Contributory Scheme for Bank Fishermen Regulations</i>	2006
<i>National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the Republic of Mauritius</i>	2006
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Marine Protected Areas) (Amendment) Regulations</i>	2007
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources Act</i>	2007
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Fishing of Sea Cucumbers) Regulations</i>	2009

Governance Text	Year
<i>National Climate Change Adaptation Policy Framework</i>	2012
<i>Customer Charter</i>	2013
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Fishing of Octopus) Regulations</i>	2016
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Automatic Identification System) Regulations</i>	2016
<i>Fisheries and Marine Resources (Safety and Security Measures for Fishermen at Sea) Regulations</i>	2016
<i>Protocol setting out the fishing opportunities and the financial contribution provided for by the Fisheries Partnership Agreement, European Union and Republic of Mauritius</i>	2017

Threats and drivers of change in fisheries

Threats to fisheries and encouraging examples of how these are being addressed include:

- ▶ Climate change has resulted in coastal erosion from tidal surges and sea level rise (3.8mm a year between 1988 and 2014)⁴⁴, as well as impacts to marine habitats and resources mostly because of warming seas (e.g., coral bleaching, increasing juvenile fish mortality, and changing fish migration patterns). Several projects have engaged with women's groups to co-design and implement activities that strengthen their capacity to adapt to climate change impacts. In one example, training and project participation empowered women to consult and negotiate with the local fishermen's association, a critical step in planning for the main alternative livelihood activity, seaweed cultivation.⁴⁵ In another, support was provided to the Shoals Rodrigues Association to implement a community-based adaptation project to help the highly fishing-dependent community in Baie du Nord adapt to climate change.⁴⁶ Activities associated with livelihood diversification were particularly important for empowering local women.⁴⁶ The growing climate crisis is also in part leading to a spike in the number of people migrating from the island of Rodrigues to mainland Mauritius.⁴⁴
- ▶ Pollution, including the recent Wakashio oil spill, as well as sedimentation and algal blooms due to fertilisers used in agriculture, has been linked to the degradation of coastal marine life.^{10,14}
- ▶ Overfishing^{18,47} and destructive fishing techniques (including for octopus) have resulted in fisheries resource depletion and coral reef habitat degradation.¹⁶ The maximum sustainable yield for octopus has been exceeded, with most octopi being caught before they reach maturity. On the island of Rodrigues, as a result of overfishing, climate change and pollution, local fishers observed a 75 per cent decrease in octopus and reef fish catches between 1994 and 2011, leading to a decline in their earnings⁴⁷. Efforts to reduce fishing pressure (including, notably, a seasonal octopus fisheries closure, established with the collaboration of fisher communities starting in 2012)⁴⁷ have focused on protecting key habitats and sensitizing stakeholders to the importance of this work.
- ▶ Social and economic impacts of COVID-19 have resulted in widening gender gaps and disproportionate implications for women.^{14,48}
- ▶ Overcapacity of foreign fishing fleets (particularly from the EU) within Mauritius' EEZ, in combination with very low access fees paid to local

governments by those fleets, have depleted fish stocks in local waters. These large industrial fleets have also led to the displacement of small-scale fisheries fleets, undermining local communities' food and nutrition security. The Syndicat des Pêcheurs, together with Stella Maris, the General Workers Federation and the Centre for Alternative Research and Studies in Mauritius have advocated for fisheries to be managed by local communities instead of having trade agreements with the EU.⁴⁹ A current agreement is set at a reference tonnage for tuna and tuna-like species of 4,000 tonnes per year, with fishing opportunities for 40 tuna purse seiners and 45 long liners⁵⁰ (22 and 12 of which are Spanish, respectively).⁵¹

Gender in ODA allocation for fisheries

Between 2010 and 2019, Mauritius received a total of USD 1.3 million in fisheries Official Development Assistance (ODA), none of which was classified as supporting gender equality focused fisheries projects (i.e., tagged with gender markers 1 or 2, qualitative statistical tools to record development activities that target gender equality as a policy objective).^{52,53} See accompanying detailed descriptive language about the tool on our website for further information.

Fisheries-focused financing was provided by:

Norway	Japan	New Zealand
88%	7%	5%

Programmes or initiatives aiming to advance gender equality in fisheries

The Association of Women Managers in the Maritime Sector in Eastern and Southern Africa (WOMESA) Mauritius was established in December 2007 to advocate for gender equity, improve women's access to maritime training and technology, and promote their advancement to key-decision levels.⁵⁴

At a recent workshop to mark the first International Day of Women in Maritime Industry, the Minister of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping announced that women would be given priority in the delivery of 100 licenses for shrimp net fishing and 100 licenses for oyster collectors.⁵⁴

In Rodrigues, women's cooperatives and the Forum for Rodrigues Women Entrepreneurs (FFER) actively support and promote the role of women within fisheries. The Rodrigues Regional Assembly holds yearly octopus (fishing) closures, and NGOs like Shoals of Rodrigues and Ter Mer Rodriguez Association are leading community-based projects (including animal husbandry and seaweed farming) focused on diversifying livelihood opportunities to reduce women's dependency on fishing.^{55,56} In addition, women have been actively involved in the monitoring of fisheries landings, with women making up over one-third of those employed as Community Resource Observers to monitor octopus landings.⁵⁵ There are also clear directives to ensure that both men and women are equally involved in Local Advisory Committees to manage marine resources.⁵⁵

The Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme (GEFSGP) has been important in supporting projects promoting gender inclusion in fisheries at the community level. For instance, the octopus fisheries closure, important for women in fisheries in Rodrigues, was a key initiative of the GEFSGP, which was later included in fisheries regulations in Rodrigues, and

replicated on Mauritius Island. GEFSGP projects pay special attention to gender imbalances and ensure that gender mainstreaming is incorporated into programmatic activities and gender issues cut across all capacity building activities.⁴³

E€OFISH, a new programme promoted and funded by the European Union to enhance equitable economic growth by promoting sustainable fisheries across East Africa, Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region, was launched in Port Louis in November 2020.⁵⁷ In the Republic of Mauritius, it is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping. One of the main aims of the project is to support greater participation of women and young people in post-harvest processing activities.⁵⁵ As of December 2022, the Gender and Youth Action Plan has been finalized.⁵⁸

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA) and was funded with aid from the UK government. In addition, this publication benefitted from the kind review of Elizabeth Selig and Katie Jewett (Stanford Center for Ocean Solutions).

Layout and graphics: Julia Rende / Azote

Cite this fact sheet as: Wabnitz C.C.C., Harper S., Naggea J. et al. (2023) Gender and Fisheries - the Republic of Mauritius. Country Fact Sheet. Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA).



Fisherwoman with her octopus catch. Photo: © Shoals Rodrigues



Fisherwoman working as part of a fishing cooperative bringing in her catch to shore. Photo: © Josheena Naggea

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