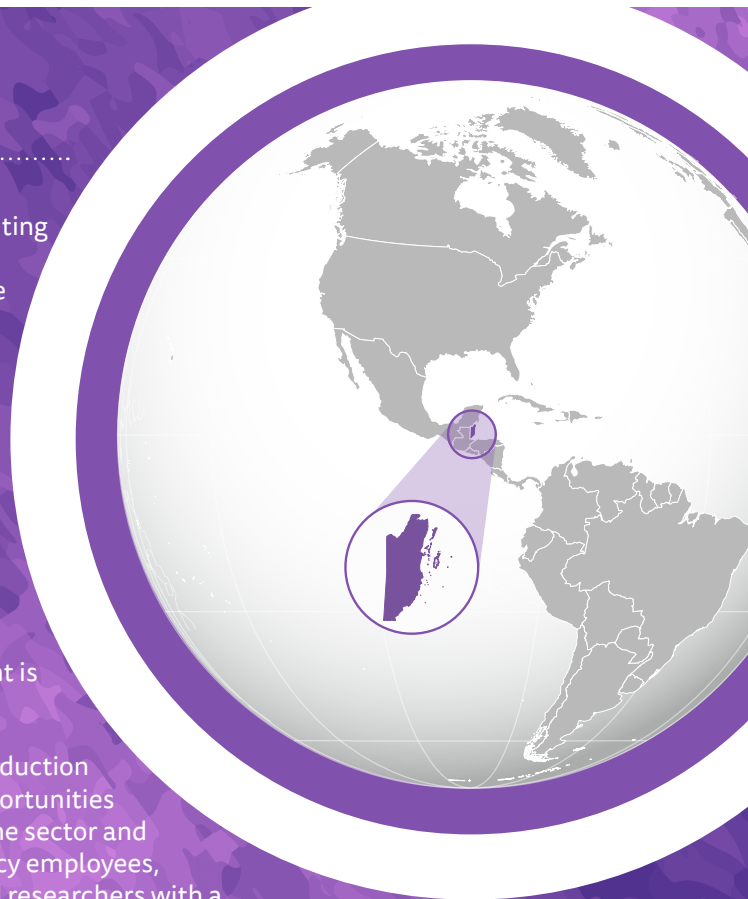


# Belize

Women play an active role in Belize's fisheries sector, contributing to boat-based fish harvesting, processing, value-adding activities, administration and management. Initiatives like the Women In Fisheries Forum (WIFF) have increased recognition of the importance of women's contributions across fisheries value chains and fostered support for their involvement. However, women still face barriers in accessing fishing livelihoods and their contributions remain underappreciated.

Traditional gender roles in Belize extend to women in the fisheries sector and emphasise marriage, childbearing and care giving responsibilities. These norms also extend to the political sphere, where women's representation in national parliament remains low. However, women representation in non-elected roles related to fisheries and coastal management is comparatively high.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of seafood production in Belize, 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, civil society organisations, 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

### National data

Annual domestic marine capture fish production was estimated at 964 tonnes (landed weight) in 2022, with 847 fishing vessels operating as part of the commercial sector. For the same year, high seas fishery production was estimated at 97,587 tonnes, and aquaculture production at 149 tonnes (live weight).<sup>5</sup>

### Sea Around Us data

The Sea Around Us<sup>a</sup> estimated total annual marine capture production for Belize's fleets as follows:

- ▶ Marine subsistence<sup>b</sup> (2019) – 938 tonnes
- ▶ Marine commercial<sup>c</sup> (2019) – 471,375 tonnes by the *industrial* sector, with 34.1 tonnes caught within Belize's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The remaining catch was caught by Belize-flagged vessels in the EEZs of Mauritania (64% of total catch by the industrial sector), Gabon (11%), Guinea-Bissau (9%), Liberia (6%), Ghana (6%) and Cote d'Ivoire (3%). As part of industrial fisheries, Belize-flagged vessels also caught 26,212 tonnes on the high seas. Local *artisanal* fleets accounted for 6,947 tonnes captured within Belize waters.

There was no foreign industrial fishing in Belize's EEZ in 2019, nor between 2019 and 2024.

## Fish consumption

Apparent fish consumption<sup>d</sup> was estimated at 17.4 kg per capita per year (2021),<sup>2</sup> accounting for about 12% of animal-based protein supply.<sup>3</sup>

Fish consumption in Belizean households varies across cultural groups. Surveys indicate that Garífuna communities consume the most fish, followed by Creole and Spanish-speaking Mestizo households.<sup>4</sup>

## Economic contribution to GDP

The fisheries sector contributed around 0.5% of GDP in 2022 (current prices).<sup>5</sup>

On average, fisheries and aquaculture accounted for 12% of total exports from 2015 to 2021.<sup>6</sup>

## Employment (all)

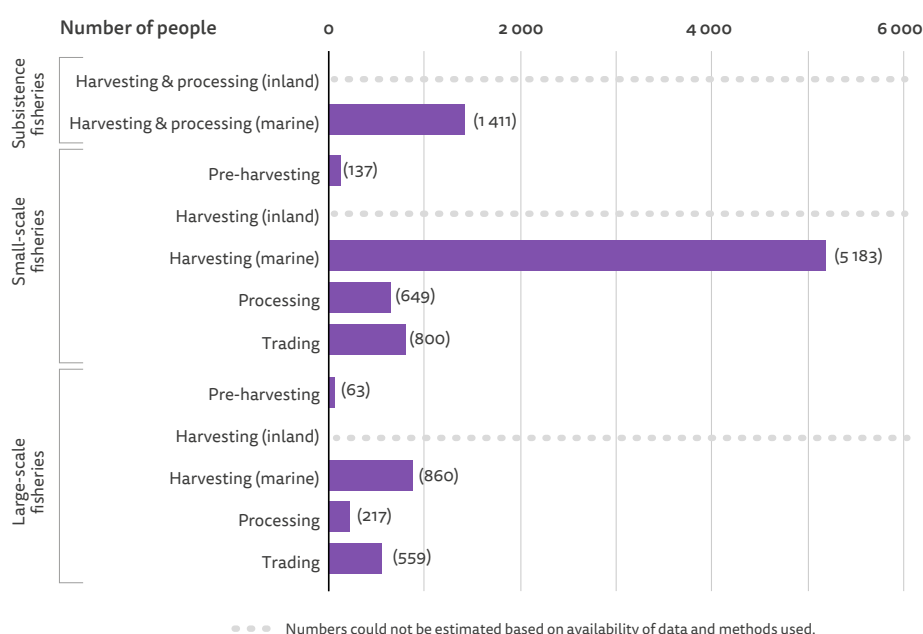
“Between 5,387 and up to 20,432 persons (11% of the labour force) were estimated to be employed in other fisheries-dependent activities.”

### National data

National data from the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) suggests that in 2022 3,376 people were employed directly in marine commercial capture fisheries and between 5,387 and up to 20,432 persons (11% of the labour force) were estimated to be employed in other fisheries-dependent activities.<sup>5</sup>

### Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates

The Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) Initiative<sup>e,7</sup> estimated that a total of 9,879 individuals<sup>f</sup> engage in the fisheries sector (2022), including pre-and post-harvest as well as subsistence fishing activities. According to the IHH, most individuals are involved in the marine small-scale fisheries (SSF)<sup>g</sup> sub-sector (see figure below). The IHH also estimated that in 2022, a total of approximately 34,980 people depended, at least partly, on fisheries or subsistence fishing<sup>h</sup>: 24,443 in SSF, 5,514 in subsistence fisheries and 5,023 in large scale fisheries (LSF).<sup>i</sup>



## Employment (women)

### National data

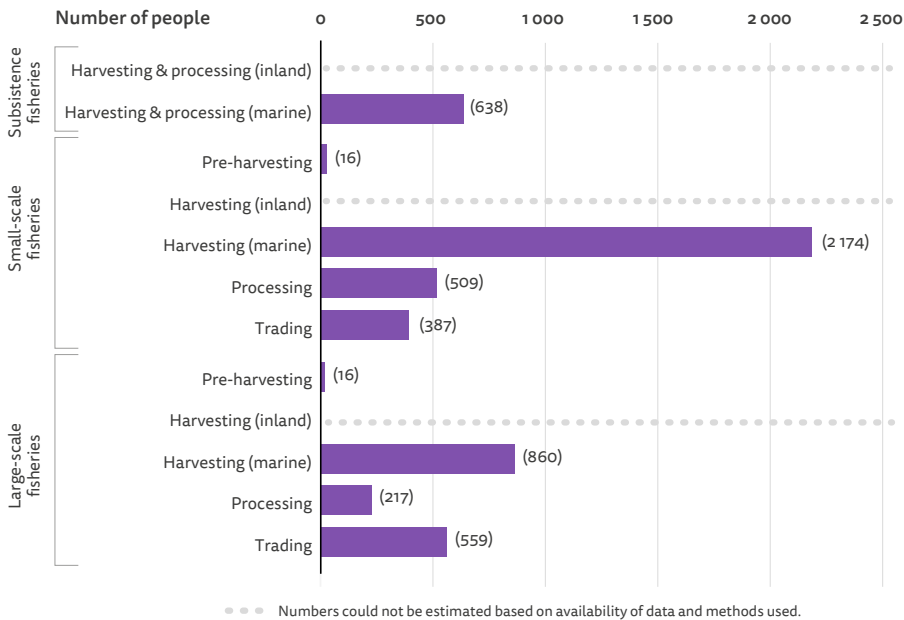
Women are involved in boat-based harvesting activities with official estimates from 2020 showing that women comprised 3% of small-scale commercial fisherfolk<sup>10</sup> (ca. 72 individuals).<sup>11</sup> A study conducted

in 2023 estimated that there were around 100 licensed and unlicensed fisherwomen,<sup>12</sup> and in 2024, the Belize Fisheries Department reported that there were 113 licensed female fishers.<sup>j</sup> However, a survey conducted for the Women In Fisheries Forum (WIFF) in 2023 showed that many women fish without commercial licenses, suggesting official figures likely underestimate their participation.<sup>13</sup> Most fisherwomen are based in the Belize and Stann Creek Districts. The gender ratio in the marine fisheries sector as a whole is reported to be slowly improving, increasing from 1 woman for every 60 men in 2008 to 1 woman for every 44 men in 2018.<sup>14</sup>

“A total of 4,101 women are active in fisheries, with the small-scale fisheries sector providing the greatest source of livelihoods for women.”

### Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates

The IHH Initiative<sup>7</sup> estimated that a total of 4,101 women are active in fisheries (2022), with the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector providing the greatest source of livelihoods for women (see figure below). According to IHH, women account for 45% and 42% of the total number of people engaged in subsistence fisheries and marine SSF, respectively. Women play an outsized role in the processing of fish from SSF, representing 78% of individuals active in this fisheries subsector. They represent 48% of those engaged in SSF trading activities. In large-scale fisheries (LSF), women make up 48% of those engaged in processing and 46% of those engaged in trading activities.



Commercial fisherwomen in Belize fish in the same coastal marine areas and operate under the same rules as fishermen. Fishing from boats, they target molluscs (queen conch, *Aliger/Eubatus/Strombus gigas*), crustaceans (spiny lobster, *Panulirus argus*) and a diversity of finfish in the intertidal, shallow water and reef zones. Their catches are destined for both export and subsistence use.<sup>11</sup> Many women enter fishing through family connections and are also involved in the transmission of generational knowledge and cultural practices associated with fishing.<sup>3,11</sup>

Historically, women’s contributions to fisheries processing have been overlooked due to the lack of sex-disaggregated data.<sup>15</sup> Estimates suggest that between 60-70% of workers in cooperative processing plants are women.<sup>14</sup> Processing work can be permanent or seasonal, and peak times coincide with the first four to six weeks of the queen conch and spiny lobster seasons.<sup>11,14</sup> Women were also previously employed in shrimp processing before shrimp trawling was banned in 2010 and an outbreak of Early Mortality Syndrome (EMS) in 2014-2015 led to the closure of many shrimp farming businesses across Belize.<sup>3,11</sup>

**“Women are involved at every point of the fisheries value chain in Belize.”**

Women are involved at every point of the fisheries value chain in Belize.<sup>13</sup> In addition to commercial fishing and processing, women also work as fish vendors and fish cleaners in local fish markets, make and maintain fish traps,<sup>11</sup> and engage in seaweed farming.<sup>16</sup> Women also handle other pre-harvest activities like preparing meals, purchasing and preparing goods for fishing trips, collecting and sorting bait, and in some cases planning the trips, dealing with crew and expenses.<sup>13</sup> In addition, women also support family-run fishing tourism operations by preparing fish meals for tourists,<sup>11</sup> and generate extra income through value-adding activities,<sup>11</sup> such as making shakes and cosmetic products from seaweed, as well as jewellery out of discarded lionfish fins.<sup>12,17–19</sup> Women also contribute to administration and management in fisheries supply chains.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their extensive involvement, women in Belize’s fisheries face significant challenges. Within the household, their contributions to fish supply are not recognized as formal work and often unpaid. The roles that women occupy along the fisheries value chain (mostly processing) are paid less than men,<sup>k</sup> limiting women’s access to financial capital,<sup>21</sup> and their ability to sustain or expand their activities. Barriers to obtaining fishing licenses, such as the time and costs associated with travelling to Belize City and the need for updated national identification, further hinder their participation in fisherfolk associations and cooperatives, who provide access to resources and training.<sup>13</sup> A majority of male voters within these groups also results in low levels of female representation on the elected executive committees, managed access committees, and advisory boards, limiting women’s involvement in management decisions, and access to fisheries resources.<sup>l</sup> A 2017 survey of 78 women in fisheries found that 66% disagreed with the statement that there is no discrimination against women in the sector.<sup>20</sup>

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## Social considerations

**“Gender roles in Belize are traditionally defined, with high value placed on marriage, childbearing and care giving for women.”**

Gender roles in Belize are traditionally defined – and extend to the fisheries sector – with high value placed on marriage, childbearing and care giving for women.<sup>21,22</sup> Early marriage remains common, with 34% of women married or in union before the age of 18 (compared to 22% of men).<sup>23</sup> Women are often expected to stay home to manage domestic responsibilities, leading to economic dependence on men, with single mothers facing particular disadvantages.<sup>24</sup>

Gender norms that position men as dominant and women as submissive hinder community and family support for women affected by intimate partner violence.<sup>25</sup> Teenage pregnancy rates remain high, with 57 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19 in 2021.<sup>26</sup> Access to healthcare, including contraception, is geographically uneven and often dependent on spousal consent.<sup>25,27</sup>

The *National Gender Policy* (2009) reported that employment-based discrimination and traditional religious norms continue to stigmatise women who have children whilst employed or outside of wedlock.<sup>24</sup> The *Labour Act Revised Edition* (2011) has been amended to address workplace discrimination, including unfair dismissal and unequal treatment due to pregnancy, HIV status, and filing a sexual harassment case against a manager or co-worker, but challenges persist.<sup>28</sup> Despite achieving higher educational attainment – 51% of women completed upper secondary education compared to 48% of men (2013–2022)<sup>29</sup> – women in Belize continue to face significant disparities in employment and economic opportunities. Between 2010 and 2020, only 50% of women participated in the labour force, compared to 81% of men.<sup>29</sup> Sex-disaggregated statistics are unavailable to assess gender disparity in employment in the fisheries sector.<sup>21</sup>

“Women not only experience higher unemployment rates, but also tend to remain unemployed for longer periods than men...”

Women not only experience higher unemployment rates, but also tend to remain unemployed for longer periods than men,<sup>24</sup> and are more likely to be engaged in vulnerable employment. This means they are the least likely to have formal work arrangements and safety nets to guard against economic shocks.<sup>26</sup> Reduced access to stable employment limits women’s access to social security benefits.<sup>24</sup> While women and men have equal ownership rights over property on paper,<sup>30</sup> in fishing and farming, women are less likely to own assets, limiting their access to credit, loans or microfinancing.<sup>15,21</sup> This barrier is compounded by cultural practices such as male-line asset inheritance in some indigenous communities.<sup>31</sup> While more women than men now have basic banking access (52.3% compared to 44% in 2014),<sup>32</sup> as of 2009, certain banking institutions still required husbands’ signatures for their wives’ loans.<sup>24</sup>

Poverty in Belize exacerbates gender inequality, and is more pronounced in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> Multi-dimensional poverty rates however decreased from 36.5% in 2021 to 26.4% in 2023.<sup>33</sup> Historically, fluctuations in these metrics have been linked to Belize’s economic vulnerability and susceptibility to natural disasters.<sup>24</sup> A 2006 report on poverty highlighted its far reaching impacts, including psychological effects such as stress, low self-esteem, depression, hopelessness, and dependency, as well as social dimensions like crime, violence, absentee fathers, lack of education, lack of good governance, teenage pregnancy and increased discrimination against vulnerable populations.<sup>24</sup> Many of these issues were found to disproportionately affect women.<sup>24</sup> However, the lack of sex-disaggregated data limits understanding of women’s specific vulnerabilities. The Government of Belize has committed to addressing this gap in its latest report to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>34</sup>

“Gender inequities intersect with ethnic discrimination across Latin America, particularly for indigenous and Afro-descendant women.”

Belize’s multicultural society, comprising Mestizo, Creole, Maya, Garífuna, Mennonites and other groups,<sup>35</sup> adds complexity to gender issues due to varying cultural norms. For instance, girls of Mayan descent are more likely to enter unions before the age of 19.<sup>23</sup> These cultural differences intersect with socioeconomic disparities, for instance, in 2023, 60.4% of Mayan-headed households identified as experiencing multi-dimensional poverty, compared to 9.1% of Creole-headed households.<sup>33</sup> In addition, people of Mestizo descent have the highest labour force participation rate, while Garífuna have the lowest.<sup>21</sup> Gender inequities intersect with ethnic discrimination across Latin America, particularly for indigenous and Afro-descendant women, such as Garífuna women, who face compounded challenges based on their gender, economic status, and ethnic identity.<sup>15,36</sup>

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## Women’s rights and political empowerment

The Constitution of Belize (1981) enshrines gender equality in its Preamble, guaranteeing all citizens protection from discrimination based on race, place of origin, political opinions, color, creed, or sex. This constitutional foundation, along with various international conventions and agreements ratified by Belize,<sup>m</sup> forms the basis of the *National Gender Policy*. This policy provides the framework through which the Government seeks to achieve gender equality, equity and women’s empowerment.<sup>37</sup>

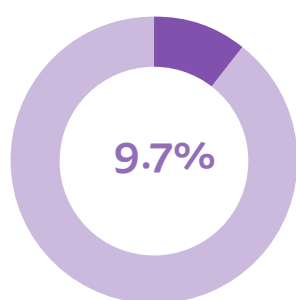
Prior to the March 2025 election, the Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation and the National Women’s Commission (established in 1982) oversaw the implementation of the *National Gender Policy*.<sup>36,38</sup> At time of writing, ministerial structures and responsibilities were being reviewed following a change in government. The National Women’s Commission played a critical role in driving gender responsive legislative reform.<sup>22</sup> The 2024-2030 revised policy focuses on



six priority areas: health; education; wealth and employment creation; gender-based violence; power and decision-making; and strengthening organisational support systems.<sup>37</sup> Despite these advances, challenges remain. The *Equal Opportunities Bill* (2020) - which seeks to promote equal opportunities and to address discrimination, stigma and violence against women and other groups - has not been tabled, after facing resistance from some faith-based groups.<sup>34,39</sup> Similar to many other Caribbean countries, but unlike other parts of Latin America, Belize has low level machineries for the advancement of women in government. This means that gender reporting occurs at the ministry or vice-ministry level, rather than higher levels of government.<sup>36</sup>

### Women in politics

Women in Belize face significant barriers to political participation, including high campaign costs, the challenges of balancing family responsibilities, concerns about personal attacks, and social norms that do not position women as political leaders.<sup>40</sup> Elected women often encounter a hostile, 'old boys club' work environment.<sup>40</sup> As of March 2025, women held 9.7% of seats in the lower chamber and 28.6% in the upper chamber<sup>41</sup> (the regional average for the Caribbean is 42.5% and 31.7% in the lower and upper chambers respectively).<sup>42</sup> Despite existing challenges, some significant elected political appointments are currently held by women. These include the first female Leader of the Opposition (Hon. Tracy Panton), the Senior Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Dolores Balderamos-Garcia), and the Minister of Human Development, Family Support & Gender Affairs (Hon. Thea Garcia Ramirez). Prominent non-elected positions are also held by Dr. Carla Barnett, a Belizean economist and politician, who has been serving as Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) since 2021; Beverly Wade, the current Director of the Blue Bond and Finance Permanence Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister, and previous Fisheries Administrator; Kennedy Carillo, CEO of the Ministry of the Blue Economy and Disaster Risk Management; and Chantelle Clark-Samuels, CEO of the Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute. While progress is evident, national and international bodies continue to highlight the need for increased female representation to ensure women's priorities and voices are adequately addressed.<sup>34</sup> The National Women's Commission is working towards this and in 2022 launched the *Empowering Women in Power* Program to increase women's participation in local government.<sup>43</sup>



Percentage of women in the lower chamber in March 2025

**“Gender-based violence remains a significant challenge in Belize, rooted in cultural norms that position men as dominant and women as submissive.”**

### Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) (physical, psychological and sexual), often occurring in domestic contexts,<sup>24</sup> remains a significant challenge in Belize, rooted in cultural norms that position men as dominant and women as submissive.<sup>40</sup> The 2023 report to CEDAW described GBV as “*endemic, systemic, socially and culturally tolerated in the Belizean community*” (p.5), and reported that between 2017-2021, 69 women were murdered and 11,461 cases of domestic violence were reported.<sup>34</sup> Actual numbers may be higher due to underreporting, especially in rural areas.<sup>25</sup> From surveys conducted between 2000 and 2018, 24% of women reported having experienced intimate partner violence, slightly below the 27% global average.<sup>26</sup> Under the *Criminal Code* (2000), rape within a marriage is not criminalised, though abortion or aiding abortion is.<sup>44</sup> However, some laws and policies have been implemented to address GBV, including *The Belize Domestic Violence Act* (1992), re-enacted in 2007 with broadened and extended protections,<sup>22</sup> and the *National Gender-Based Violence Action Plan: A Multisectoral Plan to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence in Belize* (2017-2020).<sup>45</sup> Efforts by the National Women's Commission to improve how GBV is dealt with include developing a domestic violence protocol for Belizean police;<sup>22</sup>

creating the GBV Services Complaint Form;<sup>46</sup> the GBV Referral Pathway;<sup>47</sup> advertising how to report GBV, and adapted reporting methods during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Despite these efforts, GBV and discrimination remain significant challenges for achieving gender equality in Belize.<sup>34</sup>

Women’s movement

The women’s movement in Belize gained momentum during the struggle for independence, fuelled by the international spotlight on women’s issues from the UN Decade for Women and local socio-political activism.<sup>49</sup> During this time, female-led civil societies played a crucial role in advocating for women’s rights and empowerment, driving advocacy for issues such as domestic violence protections, economic equality, and access to education and healthcare. Achievements in the 1980s included legislative victories and increased political participation. External funding and resources for local civil society organisations were instrumental in supporting these advancements. However, this external support also sometimes led to the imposition of foreign agendas that did not always align with local needs and priorities. Despite early successes, political divisions and the pervasive influence of neoliberalism and clientelism during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as internal and external pressures, ultimately led to the movement’s decline.<sup>49</sup> Today, women’s organizations continue to play a vital role in advancing gender equality and holding the government accountable to international commitments, such as those under CEDAW.

“Women’s organizations continue to play a vital role in advancing gender equality and holding the government accountable to international commitments.”

Key frameworks promoting gender equality and their ratification status<sup>n</sup>

- ✓ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified in 1990.
- ✓ Optional Protocol acceded to in 2002.<sup>50</sup> Belize submitted its combined fifth and sixth periodic reports in 2023 (12 years late).
- ✓ Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>51</sup> Belize has not submitted its national review, but information pertinent to Belize is available through regional reporting (e.g., the Economic Commission For Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)).
- ✓ Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the Convention of Belém do Pará, signed and acceded to in 1996.<sup>52</sup>

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

Higher SIGI values indicate higher inequality and range from 0 for no discrimination to 100 for very high discrimination. “-” indicates no value was available for that indicator.

Year	Total aggregated index value	Discrimination in the family	Restricted physical integrity	Restricted access to productive & financial resources	Restricted civil liberties
2019 <sup>53</sup>	-	23.7	-	-	-
2023 <sup>54</sup>	18.2	10.4	20.6	19.5	22.1

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## Gender Inequality Index (GII)

GII value is on a scale from 0 to 1, with 0 being 0% inequality, indicating women fare equally in comparison to men and 1 being 100% inequality, indicating women fare poorly in comparison to men. "Fare equally" or "poorly" compared to men, refers to women's relative standing in health, political representation, education, and economic participation.

Value (2022)<sup>55</sup>

0.364

Global Rank (2022)

86

(out of 170 countries)

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## Gender in fisheries governance

"Forty-eight fisheries governance documents were reviewed, and one is inclusive of women and gender."

Forty-eight fisheries governance documents<sup>o</sup> were reviewed, and one is inclusive of women and gender. Fisheries governance documents in Belize address a range of related challenges and concerns, including details on marine species management, deterring illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, requirements for fishing licenses, and regulations on fishing seasons.

The **National Fisheries Policy, Strategy, and Action Plan** acknowledges the increasing participation of women in the fisheries sector, citing a shift in the male-to-female ratio of fishworkers. The document sets a mission of sustainable fisheries management and development, identifying gender equality and equity - along with governance, research, cross-sector participation, enforcement, and community stewardship - as essential to achieving this goal. Furthermore, it names "*involvement of women in fisheries*," as a key pillar and establishes "*best practice standards that are sensitive to gender and vulnerable groups*" as a guiding principle. The document broadly highlights the importance of considering gender perspectives in fisheries governance and development.

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## Threats and drivers of change in fisheries

Several key threats to and drivers of change in Belize's coastal ecosystems and encouraging examples of how these may be addressed are outlined below. Threats and drivers of change to fisheries may have specific gender dimensions associated with them making gender integration necessary in efforts to improve adaptation and foster resilience in the face of change.

► **Overfishing** - Marine capture fisheries represent the most important fisheries sector in Belize,<sup>56</sup> yet overfishing remains a major challenge. Between 1983 and 2009, national cooperatives saw a 90% decline in finfish deliveries, driven by falling catches and a declining export market.<sup>3</sup> Recent work focused on catch reconstruction indicates that 17 out of 20 important target species are currently exploited at unsustainable levels, with 19 requiring management adjustments,<sup>57</sup> though these findings have not been endorsed by all stakeholders in Belize.<sup>58,59</sup> Fisherfolk on island outposts, as well as skiff, sailboat and skin-diving fishers bear the brunt of declining marine resources, especially outside protected areas.<sup>60</sup>

Resource depletion is a major concern, given the number of people who directly benefit from the fishing industry.<sup>57</sup> Some scientists and fisherfolk agree that deep-sea refuges can no longer sustain current fishing levels,<sup>61</sup> but Belize has the necessary foundations in place to support science-based management adjustments that could reverse these trends. Key export species, such as spiny lobster and queen conch especially



“Belize’s Managed Access Programme, a rights-based access programme, ensures traditional fisherfolk access to fishing grounds.”

show strong recovery potential under appropriate management,<sup>57</sup> and the polycentric structure of Belize’s fishing industry shows significant potential for effective management of fisheries.<sup>62</sup>

- Belize’s **Managed Access Programme**, a rights-based access programme, ensures traditional fisherfolk access to fishing grounds.<sup>63,64</sup> Its success relies heavily on cooperation between multiple parties with different perspectives, which can be complex to maintain.<sup>62,65</sup> Fisherfolk representation occurs through a system of cooperatives, associations and independent interest groups.<sup>62</sup> However, the programme has struggled with overcapacity,<sup>65</sup> with concerns raised about the increasing number of licensed fishers,<sup>60</sup> and inadequate enforcement.<sup>66</sup> Fisherfolk have also expressed a desire for greater involvement in management decisions,<sup>67</sup> raised concerns about potential exclusion from future conservation and fisheries decision-making processes,<sup>66</sup> and highlighted the need for better financing mechanisms for marine management.<sup>68</sup>

The cooperatives, instrumental in the export of spiny lobster and queen conch, have faced recent struggles due to growing numbers of fishers selling directly to hotels and restaurants,<sup>3,60</sup> less commitment from younger fisherfolk,<sup>3</sup> and instances of financial mismanagement.<sup>60</sup> The latter can have knock-on effects for fisherfolks’ social security.<sup>9</sup>

- **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing** threatens Belize’s marine ecosystems and fishing communities. Transboundary fishing is a concern, with vessels from Honduras and Guatemala reported to be targeting finfish spawning aggregations and sharks, as well as fishing in marine reserves.<sup>69–71</sup> In some areas, this fishing likely accounts for 95% of illegal fishing.<sup>70</sup> Other forms of illegal fishing include landing under-sized catches, fishing during closed seasons or in restricted areas, and destructive practices (e.g., smashing small conch for pearls).<sup>66</sup> Fisherfolk have also reported gear theft, adding to their financial burden.<sup>3</sup> The prevalence of IUU fishing undermines local compliance<sup>70</sup> and faith in management.<sup>67</sup> Limited resources hinder effective monitoring, control and surveillance as well as management and enforcement by the fisheries authorities.<sup>66,72</sup> To address these issues, the *Fisheries Resources Act* (2020) introduced stricter penalties and expanded powers for fisheries officers. The Fisheries Department is also collaborating with the coastguard and co-managers to increase monitoring efforts.<sup>70</sup>

“A lack of comprehensive scientific data on fisheries target species, landings and overall catch is another threat to the sustainability of Belize’s fisheries.”

- A **lack of comprehensive scientific data** on fisheries target species, landings and overall catch is another threat to the sustainability of Belize’s fisheries. Key issues include the lack of stock assessments for finfish (which are consumed locally) and publicly available stock assessments for key export species.<sup>72,73</sup> Comprehensive stock assessments are critical to develop robust management plans for all target species.<sup>72</sup>
- **Climate change** – Belize’s economic reliance on spiny lobster and queen conch (95% to 98% of Belize’s marine exports between 2016 and 2022)<sup>72</sup> makes it highly vulnerable to climate change,<sup>74</sup> as the loss of associated fishing livelihoods could drive coastal communities into poverty.<sup>31</sup> Climate change affects fisheries by degrading habitats that are critical to commercial species, such as coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves, in turn affecting target species stocks.<sup>56</sup> Climate change also directly impacts coastal infrastructure and communities. How these impacts are felt has been shown to vary by gender,<sup>31</sup> though limited research has explored these differential and intersectional effects under different climate scenarios.<sup>9</sup> Below is an overview of how climate change affects fisheries and human coastal communities:

“Disaster impacts are reported to be gendered in Belize - men face higher physical risks and are more likely to die during disasters, while women carry a greater burden during the preparation and recovery phase.”

- **Rising sea surface temperatures** can trigger large scale coral bleaching events and mortality.<sup>56</sup> Concerns have been raised that current reef protection measures may be insufficient to support reef resilience against climate change.<sup>60</sup> Fisherfolk have also reported challenges from rising temperatures on day-to-day working practices, especially when working at sea from small boats without shade.<sup>75</sup>
- **Ocean acidification** is also likely to affect coral reef habitat, as well as the ability of species with exoskeletons, like queen conch, to form shells.<sup>56</sup>
- **Sea level rise** - projected to increase by 40cm by 2080 - will lead to permanent coastal flooding, and loss of coastal ecosystems and infrastructure.<sup>56</sup> Coastal communities in Belize have historically adapted by modifying livelihoods or engaging in local collective action rather than relocating,<sup>76-78</sup> but it's unclear how they will respond in the future.
- **Saltwater intrusion** into coastal aquifers may also reduce access to fresh water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, with particularly severe impacts on women and girls.<sup>31,56</sup>
- The loss of mangroves and coastal lands heightens vulnerability to **hurricanes**, which are likely to increase in frequency and intensity under climate change.<sup>56,79</sup>
- **Disaster impacts** are reported to be gendered in Belize - men face higher physical risks and are more likely to die during disasters,<sup>31</sup> while women carry a greater burden during the preparation and recovery phase<sup>32</sup> - though as elsewhere this is difficult to quantify without gendered disaggregated data.<sup>32</sup> Women are also more likely to suffer property damages due to limited access to resources to hazard proof their housing.<sup>31</sup> Some fisherfolk report relying solely on community support for post-hurricane rebuilding,<sup>60</sup> while others rely on savings, loans and remittances, and external aid. In the aftermath of disasters, men and boys may migrate in search of work, whilst women and older girls may resort to or be forced into sex work.<sup>31</sup> Loss of livelihoods associated with hurricanes can also lead to an increase in gender-based violence.<sup>31</sup>
- **Lionfish**, an invasive species first recorded in Belize in 2008, pose a threat to coral reefs and associated small-scale fisheries.<sup>80</sup> In response, Belize has launched several initiatives, including fishing tournaments, rewards, and promoting lionfish as food and jewellery products.<sup>81</sup>
- **Tensions between fisheries and tourism** – Whilst tourism provides economic benefits to coastal communities, it can lead to habitat degradation<sup>56</sup> through coastal development and increased boat traffic, impacting fisherfolk's livelihoods.<sup>60</sup> Tensions arise from recreational operators engaging in fishing activities with fewer regulations. There are reports, for example, of inadequate monitoring and enforcement of tourist operators taking visitors fishing in marine reserves and selling excess catch to hotels and restaurants, further affecting commercial fishers.<sup>60</sup>
- **The COVID-19 pandemic** led to widespread loss of livelihoods, associated with increased crime rates and gender-based violence.<sup>31</sup> The crisis also highlighted the value of fishing livelihoods and the risks of overreliance on tourism.<sup>82</sup> In response, some fisherfolk have diversified their food and income sources by growing vegetables to prepare for future disruptions.<sup>3</sup> Women were particularly hard hit economically due to their reliance on informal jobs in the tourism sector, underscoring the gender disparities in economic resilience.<sup>34</sup>

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## Gender in ODA allocation for fisheries

Between 2012 and 2022, Belize received a total of USD 0,15 million in fisheries Official Development Assistance (ODA),<sup>r</sup> of which 30% (USD 0,04 million) was allocated to gender equality focused projects (i.e., tagged with gender markers 1 or 2). No gender focussed financing for Belize scored as 'Principal' (gender marker 2). Both fisheries aid and gender focused fisheries aid to Belize represent <1% respectively of fisheries and gender aid to the Central American and Caribbean region.

Of the ODA screened for gender markers, 100% of gender-equality focussed financing for fishing in Belize came from Canada (100%).

Canada  
**100%**

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## Examples of programmes or initiatives aiming to advance gender equality in fisheries

The **Women In Fisheries Forum (WIFF)**, launched in 2017 with support from the Marine Conservation and Climate Adaptation Project (MCCAP) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), has been key in recognising women's contributions to and empowering women across Belize's fisheries value chains. Held annually, WIFF provides a platform for women in fisheries to share experiences, discuss challenges, and advocate for further research and data collection to inform gender inclusive policies.<sup>10</sup> The forum's efforts culminated in the establishment of the first Women in Fisheries Association in 2024,<sup>83</sup> which focuses on increasing women's visibility and influence in the sector.<sup>12</sup> The first president, Paula Jacobs-Williams, has identified securing retirement benefits for fisherwomen as a priority area for the Association.<sup>75</sup>

Since 2015 Belize has celebrated **Fisherfolk month** in June. Building on the WIFF and the establishment of the Women in Fisheries Association, the theme of the 2024 event was '*Leave no one behind in building an enabling environment for our small-scale artisanal fisheries*', recognising the crucial contributions of women to fisheries.<sup>84</sup> As part of this event, there is an annual "Fisher of the year" award, previously won by fisherwomen such as Maria Allen from Caye Caulker in 2021 as well as fishermen.<sup>85</sup> Keys funders of this event include the Ministry of Blue Economy and Disaster Risk Management, the Nature Conservancy, the Belize Tourism Board and the Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas Initiative.<sup>84</sup>

The **Belize Marine Conservation and Climate Adaptation Project (MCCAP)**,<sup>86</sup> which ended in 2020, sought to implement ecosystem-based marine conservation and climate adaptation measures to strengthen the climate resilience of the Belize Barrier Reef System. The project integrated gender equity and empowerment<sup>s</sup> specifically by addressing barriers to women's participation in a culturally sensitive manner,<sup>t</sup> and achieved a target of 30% women involvement in their livelihood diversification work.<sup>87</sup> This project was later built on by the **Enhancing Adaptation Planning and Increasing Climate Resilience in the Coastal Zone and Fisheries Sector of Belize** project, funded in 2021 by the Global Climate Fund (GCF) and executed by several agencies of the Government of Belize, in collaboration with the GCF and FAO.<sup>88</sup> The aim of the project was to increase the resilience of the coastal zone and fisheries sectors of Belize to climate change impacts.<sup>88</sup> The project adopted a gender inclusive approach, and helped organise and facilitate the fifth WIFF, which sought to support women in utilizing their local knowledge, skills, and leadership positions to respond to climate change within their fishing communities and the coastal zone area. The meeting also focused on establishing a basic understanding of the links between

gender and climate change, highlighting the role of women, co-developing a gender strategy for Belize's small-scale fisheries and coastal zone sector; and identifying opportunities for building climate-resilient coastal communities.<sup>89,90</sup> The resultant *Gender Strategy, Action Plan, and M&E framework for the coastal zone and fisheries sector of Belize (2022-2027)* is now being applied by the relevant government bodies.<sup>91</sup>

In 2021, following the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately affected women's employment, the Belizean government partnered with the Embassy of the Republic of China (Taiwan) on the project ***Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in Latin America and the Caribbean in the COVID-19 post-pandemic era***. As part of this project, 25 women in Caye Caulker, including fisherwomen, received training in seaweed farming and salt production.<sup>92,93</sup>

In 2023, the Wildlife Conservation Society, in partnership with the International Institute for Sustainable Development and with support from Global Affairs Canada, launched a ***Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas Initiative*** with country specific activities for Belize.<sup>94</sup> The 3-year initiative focusses on integrating gender-responsive, conflict-sensitive Nature based Solutions (NbS) into protected areas and landscape management. It involves: (1) updating the management plans for two marine protected areas to incorporate gender equity, social inclusion and climate adaptation; (2) providing supplementary livelihoods initiatives tailored to fisher families, women and underrepresented groups (i.e., tourism sector, crafting and sewing, seaweed farming expansion); (3) habitat restoration activities within communities and protected areas; and (4) a radio novela that uses a combination of gender-responsive and transformative methods and messages to foster and sustain support for the engagement of women and underrepresented groups in NbS for adaptation, and the adoption of supplementary livelihood options.<sup>95</sup>

In 2024, the Government of Canada funded the ***Sustainable Technologies for Adaptation and Resilience in Fisheries project (STAR-Fish)***. Inter alia, this three-year project will apply gender-responsive strategies to enhance national capacities for mainstreaming renewable energy in the Caribbean fisheries and aquaculture sectors of eight ODA-eligible Caribbean countries, including Belize.<sup>95</sup>

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## Lead authors

**Anna J. Woodhead** - Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, Sweden

**Colette C.C. Wabnitz** - Stanford Center for Ocean Solutions, Stanford University, USA and the Institute for Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Canada

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## Contributing authors and reviewers

**Eric Wade** - Department of Coastal Studies, East Carolina University

**Melanie McField** - Healthy Reefs for Healthy People

**Ralna Lamb Lewis** - Wildlife Conservation Society, Belize

**Raphael S. Martínez** - Healthy Reefs for Healthy People

**Peter A. Murray** - Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) Secretariat, Belize

**Sandra Grant** - Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) Secretariat, Belize

**Stuart Fulton** - Comunidad y Biodiversidad

### Core team

**Albert Norström** - Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, Sweden and Earth Commission, Future Earth Secretariat, Sweden

**Allison Cutting** - Institute for Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Canada

**Gianluigi Nico** - World Bank (formerly with Food and Agriculture Organization), Italy

**Johanna Sofia Bernström** - Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, Sweden

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Left: Ms. Maria Allen, Belizean Caye Caulker Fisherwoman, hauling lobster traps with her husband and son (credit: R. Lamb Lewis/WCS); Top right: Ms. Rita Leslie harvesting seaweed at Golden Charms Seaweed farms (credit: Anon./UNBELIZEABLU); Bottom right: Elected executive committee for the National Women in Fisheries Association (credit: E. Cruz/WCS)



## Endnotes

- a Marine fisheries statistics are derived from catch reconstruction under the Sea Around Us - <http://www.seaaroundus.org/data/#/eez>. The approach utilized builds on national statistics and accounts for discards as well as sectoral catch data that often is not included in official datasets (e.g., artisanal or recreational catches). The Sea Around Us data is also utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project. Sea Around Us data are distinguished according to the following categories: large-scale (i.e., industrial) and small-scale (i.e., artisanal, subsistence and recreational) fisheries catches. Recreational catches were not considered here.
- b “Marine subsistence” is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by the subsistence sector. This consists of fisheries conducted by women and/or noncommercial fishers for consumption by one’s family, and where applicable, the fraction of the commercial catch that is given to crew or the community (mainly from small-scale fisheries).<sup>1</sup>
- c “Marine commercial” is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by commercial fisheries. These are fisheries whose landed catch is sold commercially (as opposed to being consumed and/or given away to the crew) and encompass both the industrial (large-scale) and artisanal (small-scale) sectors.<sup>1</sup>
- d The term “apparent” refers to the average food available for consumption, which for several reasons (for example, waste at the household level), is not equal to average food intake or average food consumption. The amount is calculated as production + imports – exports – non-food uses, +/- stocks variations and divided by number of people partaking of it.
- e The Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates are utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project (visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to access all the fact sheets).
- f Estimates calculated based on labour force surveys and Income Expenditure Surveys as part of the Illuminating Hidden Harvests project.
- g Small Scale Fisheries (SSF) are distinguished from Large Scale Fisheries (LSF) according to a characterisation matrix that distinguishes between fisheries according to gear use, vessel characteristics, fishing operations, types of storage and preservation of catch, employment/labour, and use of catch. The characterisation matrix allows for a standardised approach to classify and characterize fisheries at the global and regional level, allowing for high levels of variation between fisheries. SSF generally includes low-technology, low-capital, labour-intensive fishing practices. Often, the term artisanal is used to refer to small-scale fisheries. In the context of the IHH work, the term “small-scale fisheries” refers to the whole value chain of pre-harvest, harvesting and post-harvest activities, including subsistence fisheries and excluding recreational fisheries.<sup>9</sup>
- h Subsistence fisheries activities, also referred to as “working for own consumption”, are defined by the IHH as activities that individuals of any sex and age carried out at least once over the last 12 months in order to produce and process fish for their own final use, with no transaction occurring in the marketplace. By definition, they are considered here as small-scale fisheries (Table 2.1.; in reference 5)<sup>8</sup>
- i According to IHH estimates, 32,760 people belong to a household where at least one person engages in fisheries or in subsistence fishing.
- j Pers. Comm. (24th October 2024) Belize Fisheries Department to Raphael S. Martínez, Healthy Reefs for Healthy People.
- k Details provided by co-authors.
- l Details provided by co-authors.
- m CEDAW, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention of Belem Do Para (1994), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) Conventions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- n Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- o Sourced from the databases FAO LEX, ECO LEX, and SSF LEX. Fisheries governance documents include fisheries policies, laws, acts, plans, strategies, and regulations. A database of all reviewed governance documents can be found here: 10.5281/zenodo.15098510.
- p Details provided by co-authors.
- q Details provided by co-authors.
- r Different from OECD standard methods, this is measured in disbursements from DAC countries (including EU Institutions) to recipient countries. This captures the amount of money given, as opposed to the amount of money committed. Original data was downloaded on 17th June 2024.
- s Sandra Grant, personal communication.
- t Sandra Grant, personal communication.
- u Details provided by co-authors.

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