



Un-gendering the ocean: Why women matter in ocean governance for sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint emphasizes gendered perspectives and reflects on gender roles for sustainability-focused governance. It argues that when considering gender in this context, not only equity, or power-plays between genders are at stake; in addition, for effective ocean governance, an irreducible contribution of female voices is necessary. Some key contributions of women in the field of ocean governance-related research are described as examples. If women, for instance, are not included in fisheries management, we miss the complete picture of social-ecological linkages of marine ecosystems. Overall, women are often regarded as major actors driving sustainable development because of their inclusiveness and collaborative roles. Similarly, women have advocated for the common good in marine conservation, raising important (and often neglected) concerns. In maritime industries, women enlarge the talent pool for innovation and smart growth. Besides the manifold possibilities for promoting the involvement of women in ocean governance and policy-making, this viewpoint highlights how gendered biases still influence our interactions with the ocean. It is necessary to reduce the structural, and systemically-embedded hurdles that continue to lead to gendered decision-taking with regard to the ocean.

1. Introduction

In the animal world, the sea is a suitable backdrop for the un-winding of the dramas played out between different genders.¹ Among its direct inhabitants are fascinating exemplars such as the mesmerizing clownfish (*Amphiprion percula*) and the unsightly parasitic anglerfish (*Neoceratias spinifer*), the former a sequential hermaphrodite while the latter exhibits extreme sexual dimorphism [1]. Clownfish thrive in groups, all males until the largest, most dominant "family" member morphs into a female who then mates incestuously with a series of males until replaced by the next dominant male-turned-matriarch. Male anglerfish live out their entire lives as tiny, helpless and blind parasitic dwarves attached to the larger female, surviving only while infused through most of their organs, including their circulatory system, to the female host.

But what of humans? How do human-beings relate to the seas and how does our gender as a social, rather than merely a biological attribute, influence our relationship to the marine environment and to each

other?

These are questions that require more research, and yet, they suggest that there is lack of knowledge about gender relations vis á vis ocean governance and research [2]. In the early days of internationally coordinated governance discussions, with activist Elizabeth Mann Borgese already the ocean had a crucial female representative [3]. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was actively co-shaped by the *Pacem in Maribus* (Peace in the Ocean) discussions initiated by Mann Borgese. During this period (the late 1960s to early 1980s), with her crucial contribution, many important installments to the international ocean governance framework were made. Yet, these contributions were made to the general field of ocean governance and its role for international cooperation and peace-building alliances, not necessarily related to a gendered or diversity-oriented perspective to ocean governance and marine research and how these perspectives come together to promote sustainability.

This viewpoint highlights gendered perspectives as they relate to the promotion of the Sustainable Development Agenda of the United

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¹ In 2008–2009, Isabella Rossellini launched the "Green Porno" series on the Sundance Channel. The focus on the variety of mating in living organisms was to raise awareness on conservation and unconventional plays between genders. The third and final season of Green Porno puts a focus on conservation of ocean life with featured biologist Claudio Campagna providing insights into the depletion of ocean resources; source: <http://www.sundance.tv/series/greenporno> (accessed at 13/10/17).

Nations [4]. As such, it reflects on the role and potential contribution that gender has to sustainability-focused ocean governance. Governance is defined as the political, social, economic, and administrative systems and related formal and informal institutional arrangements involved in the management of natural resources [5,6]. For effective sustainability-focused ocean governance (i.e., a governance regime achieving its sustainability-oriented objectives, as social inclusion among the others [7]) women are needed for moral and ethical reasons (see Jaggar, “Feminist Ethics” [8]), mostly because of the need to eliminate barriers to the participation of women in public decisions about the oceans. Therefore, what is at stake is not only equity, or power-play between genders – as is often argued in the field of gender studies (see [9]) – but the effective achievement of sustainability through ocean governance. This viewpoint proposes addressing these issues through the lens of the multiple, and often overlooked contributions of women, and thus encourages strong involvement of females in the field and especially those with varied socio-cultural backgrounds.

The important role that women may bring to ocean governance efforts can be highlighted by reviewing some of their contributions from within a range of social, cultural and historical contexts. By discussing and exemplifying some contributions of selected female colleagues in balancing development and marine conservation through research, this paper highlights important contributions women make to the field of ocean governance in an era of increasing threats to the global oceans.

2. Women and the ocean – A chronological perspective by category

While twentieth-century science was dominated by men, resulting in male biases in research questions and findings [10], the recently published Global Ocean Science Report by IOC-UNESCO assesses that with a 38% share of female ocean researchers globally, gender diversity in ocean-related research is 10% higher than in research overall [11]. The following, in form of a non-exhaustive overview, traces some of the contributions offered by a number of women to marine resources governance. By doing so, the aim is to reflect on the role of greater gender diversity in marine resources related to research and policy-making.²

2.1. Traditional fisherfolk societies

Marine-related fields have been uniquely affected by gender biases over the years. Whether in the context of industrial and small-scale fisheries, or aboard ships and vessels, the gendered life worlds of marine-based societies, have been amply documented, particularly in terms of how sailing, surfing, maritime navigation, and other forms of seafaring have historically been perceived as distinctly “masculinized” practices [12,13]. Yet these (interpretative) gendered essentialisms have also been critiqued across anthropological and transcultural scholarship spanning Oceania and the Mekong borderlands to Madagascar (cf. [14–16]), which in turn illustrate the (internally diverse) livelihood practices and ontologies of distinct sub-groups such as female pearl divers or Indigenous fisherwomen. According to one of the world's experts on fisheries science, Daniel Pauly [17], the world is a “much divided” one to begin with, and gender, among other divisions, is particularly acute in fisheries science because it is so cultural, site-specific and historically-bound.

Traditionally women have had a significant role in fishing (artisanal, commercial) and in fisherfolk societies [17], yet one that is often

overlooked or downplayed [18]. In a study that summarizes existing types of knowledge on women's participation in marine fisheries globally, Harper et al. [19] found that women play important roles in the entire fishery supply chain world-wide. However, despite fisheries being a recognized activity heavily participated in by women, the authors of the study contend that fisheries statistics often fail to capture this contribution. As analyzed by Kleiber et al. [20] for the case of small-scale fisheries, excluding gender analyses leads to the underestimation of the human catch and the diversity of species and habitats targeted by fishers, hampering a broader social-ecological understanding of fisheries.

Recently, gender-specific female roles in fisheries have been consciously assessed for their potential contribution to sustainable practices. Economic experiments conducted among fishermen from the Mexican and Colombian Pacific found that women presented more sustainable catches than men [21]. Similarly, Fonseca et al. [22] found that women in charge of small-scale artisanal fisheries in Brazil, significantly assured that these geographically and quantitatively limited resource management and use systems met high standards of sustainability. Kim [23] observes a similar distinction regarding gender-specific practices in predominantly female small-scale farmers in rural Uzbekistan when compared to the agricultural practices of the predominantly male large-scale farmers in the same region.

Yet, how much do gender-specific differences continue to play a significant role with regard to ocean governance? Zhao et al. [24] have shown that men's and women's role were re-negotiated under the impacts of policy changes of catch quota in Northern England, with women also getting more politically involved, leading eventually to “(...) a greater part in decision-making in families, communities and beyond” (p. 73). In a study of Oregon's coastal fishing communities, Calhoun et al. [20] argue that female roles in fishing are likely to continue to change because of the diverse response of individuals (among them many women) to regulatory, market- and management-driven changes. Indeed, place-based approaches are needed to understand the diversity of impacts of catch share policies because individuals (men and women) and communities are affected differently under the variety of fishery management regimes [25]. From these examples, the predominance of gender-specific role patterns seems unlikely to continue to hold, but rather that evolving and diverse responses are being continuously created.

2.2. Women and marine conservation

Besides Elizabeth Mann Borgese (mentioned above) there have been several outstanding female activist scientists that have been pivotal in the field of marine conservation. Of special note is of course Rachel Carson. As an aquatic biologist, author-activist and considered by many to be the first modern-day environmentalist, Carson began her writing career documenting the sea and appealing to the general public about environmental health, first and foremost through a concern for marine conservation. Before becoming a champion in the fight for controls of toxic chemicals, including pesticides such as DDT, she published three best-sellers: *Under the Sea Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). In 1957, Carson wrote: “...the shore can never again be itself once man has 'developed' it. The dismal truth is that shores...are fast disappearing, and may well do so completely within the life of some of us.” [26]. She was a care-giver par excellence, as she dedicated herself to the well-being of future generations, contributing substantially by putting the human-environment relationship on the political agenda [27]. Although there is no evidence that Rachel Carson defined herself a “feminist”, at the time that she started opposing the military, capitalism, the collusion of scientist and industry and more, no one made ostensibly “feminist” claims [27]. In any case, her perspectives undoubtedly emphasized marine conservation.

Another well-known female marine conservationist is Sylvia Earle. Dubbed “Her Deepness” by *The New Yorker* in 1998, Earle has been

² A search of the on-line data bases ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus using the key words “marine/ocean/sea/coastal/maritime”, “gender/woman/women” and “time preferences/sustainability/SDGs/natural resource/Common pool resources” identified 212 articles (at 10/08/2017).

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