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Making waves: women's stories from the seafood sector in Aotearoa, New Zealand

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gender equity, fisheries, aquaculture, New Zealand, sustainability

Introduction

The sustainable provision of marine fisheries and aquaculture products ("blue foods") is vital for global food security, the economy, and ocean sustainability (Leape et al., 2021; Matovu et al., 2024). The literature shows that maintaining Blue Foods' ecosystem services extends beyond environmental stewardship, however, as it intertwines deeply with social and gender dynamics (Matovu et al., 2024). Historically male-dominated, the global seafood industry shows considerable gender disparities, with women underrepresented in leadership and overrepresented in processing and marketing roles (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024; Orth, 2023). Despite these barriers, survey participants noted a positive shift toward inclusivity in New Zealand (Figure 1). Initiatives that foster confidence, enhance women's visibility, and promote leadership development are key enablers of this shift.

The Aotearoa, New Zealand perspective

Seafood is culturally and economically vital in Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ). Māori women have historically played crucial roles in gathering, processing, and preserving kai moana (seafood), essential for food security and Tikanga (cultural traditions). With strong spiritual connections to the ocean (moana), Māori women remain central in sustainable fisheries management, leadership, and the perpetuation of traditional knowledge within iwi (tribes) (Stein, 2018; Enright, 2024).

Following colonization, the fishers and then larger companies expanded, and the participation of women in New Zealand's broader seafood sector has become notable. For example, on Rakiura Stewart Island, where a community heavily relies on seafood, women have taken on pivotal roles in managing local businesses and services, including fish processing operations. Women have also held roles on large NZ-owned commercial trawlers. In the author's note and acknowledgment section of her book "Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives in the Fishing Industry," Heberley (2005) wrote that the USSR and Norway led the world in women's employment at sea, and other nations, including NZ, followed. Most of these women held roles in the factories of freezer trawlers.

The most recent industry-specific statistics for NZ (Lambeth et al., 2014) indicate that women are underrepresented in the seafood sector, accounting for ~34% of the fishing industry workforce. However, data specific to gender roles within the NZ industry is limited. This paper aims to fill the significant data gap of binary gender data in the Aotearoa, New Zealand seafood industry's workforce. In doing so, the data will be able to point to the successes and remaining equity gaps since the previous data collection in 2014.

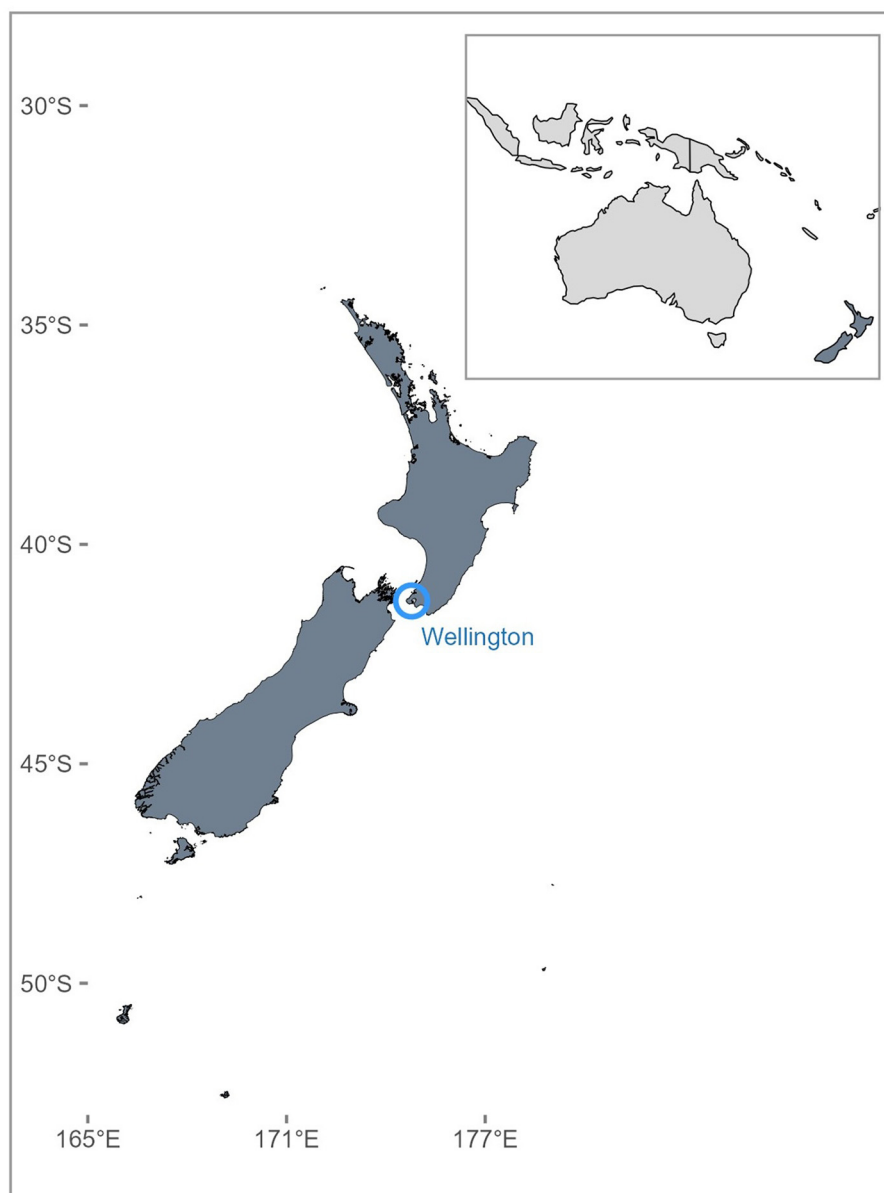


FIGURE 1

Map of Aotearoa, New Zealand (in dark gray) located within the Australasian region (inset). New Zealand is in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, southeast of Australia, and comprises the North and South Islands and numerous smaller islands. Wellington, the capital city, is marked with a blue circle to indicate where this study was initiated and coordinated.

For this article, the authors developed and disseminated a survey of 36 questions (see [Supplementary Table 1](#) for full list) to ~2,700 women across the industry sector. Of the 37 participants, 57% were between 41 and 55 years old, and 24% were 55 years old or older. Over 35% of participants had worked in the seafood industry for more than 20 years, reflecting a deep-rooted engagement and a long-standing commitment to the industry and sustainability. Survey outcomes from the main survey questions are discussed, along with participants' personal thoughts. This discussion aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), which seek to achieve gender equality and empower

all women and girls (SDG 5) and ensure the sustainable use and conservation of marine resources (SDG 14), a goal directly linked to women's traditional roles in fisheries management and sustainable harvesting (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024; Majumdar et al., 2023).

Career pathways and motivation

Survey results revealed that women's motivations for joining the seafood industry are diverse. For instance, May Tien from Moana, NZ, was inspired by the opportunity to tell the stories of

NZ's food producers, whereas Tamar Wells from Seafood NZ was driven by a desire to contribute to NZ's sustainability and resource management. Many women surveyed said their pathways into the seafood sector were profoundly personal, shaped by family ties, personal ambition, a commitment to sustainability, and a passion for the ocean.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2024) highlights that in many global fisheries, women's entry is facilitated through intergenerational knowledge transfer, a theme that is strongly reflected in the participants' responses. For example, Hayley Baxter, a fifth-generation rock lobster fisher from the South Island, described how her lifelong dream of being a fisher stemmed from growing up immersed in the industry; she says, "It's just who we are." Similarly, Chanel Gardner from the Otago Rock Lobster Industry Association also credited her family's long-standing involvement in seafood for her career choice.

Not all NZ women followed a traditional path, though. Many transitioned from other industries, bringing diverse skills that have enriched the sector. Some respondents cited backgrounds in business or conservation, aligning with FAO's observation that more women are entering the seafood sector from environmental and policy-driven motivations. This aligns with (Orth, 2023), who noted that an increasing number of women in fisheries are driven by financial necessity and environmental responsibility, balancing tradition with innovation.

Achievements in the seafood sector

Women in the NZ seafood industry have overcome barriers and achieved notable successes. They have reached significant milestones, from earning skippers' tickets to driving governance reforms, demonstrating their growing influence in the sector. With 34 years in the industry, Donna Wells exemplifies the pivotal role women play in advocating for fishers' rights and industry stability—a trend supported by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024). Through her efforts to profile women's contributions and involvement with Women in Seafood Australasia (WISA), she highlights the growing influence of female representation in driving industry innovation and global decision-making, despite historical barriers, as noted by Orth (2023). Tamar Wells made significant contributions to sustainability through the EC Tarakihi Rebuild Plan, striking a balance between the health of the fishery and the livelihoods of fishers. Diane Van Diepen advanced from processing roles on deep-sea trawlers to leadership in seafood export operations, ensuring regulatory compliance and maintaining international trade relationships. Furthermore, several respondents highlighted their involvement in establishing New Zealand's Quota Management System (QMS) in 1986, which completely reshaped industry practices.

In addition, mentorship emerged as a significant achievement, with women actively training young fishers and sharing operational best practices. These efforts support knowledge transfer and create a diverse, resilient workforce (Figure 2), aligning with FAO's (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024) recognition of women's growing roles in global fisheries leadership and sustainability. Yet mentorships were described as informal in

NZ, with respondents suggesting the industry would benefit from a well-structured, funded programme. Models such as Turn the Tide (Women in Seafood Australasia, 2025) and the Women in Ocean Food Innovation Studio (Hatch Blue, 2025) for example, provide formal programmes that empower women, support career progression, and promote gender equity across the seafood sector.

Workplace recognition and industry impact

When asked to rate the value of their contributions on a scale from 1 to 10, respondents gave an average score of 7. They emphasized the tangible impact of their perspectives and governance input on fisheries and industry decision-making, with one respondent noting, "It's rewarding to see our efforts making a real difference—not just in the industry but in how women's voices are being heard and valued."

Specific efforts to boost gender diversity include Seafood New Zealand's "Seafood Stars Awards," which recognize women's outstanding contributions, and the Women in Seafood Australasia (WISA) initiative, which addresses cultural and structural barriers across Australasia. Notably, the aquaculture sector leads the way in NZ, with structured mentorship programmes and events that celebrate women's participation and achievements.

Challenges faced by women in seafood

Despite these initiatives and achievements, significant challenges persist for women in NZ's seafood sector. Around one-third of survey respondents feel the industry's culture does not adequately value or include them, and over 64% have experienced or observed gender inequality. Barriers include exclusion from leadership roles, difficulties securing deckhand positions, and assumptions about physical capability. Joan Bridge, who has been involved in commercial fishing since 1979, has witnessed substantial changes but noted that having her input overlooked in a male-dominated arena is a recurring challenge, despite her extensive experience. Her sentiment was echoed by several respondents who felt their expertise was regularly dismissed or overshadowed. Many women highlighted the difficulty of being heard in decision-making spaces where dominance or direct communication styles, which are often less comfortable for women, are necessary.

This disparity, widely recognized in the literature, is driven by cultural norms, traditional gender roles, and perceptions of physical demands. Fishing, particularly in offshore commercial operations, has historically been viewed as "men's work," while women have typically participated in post-harvest activities such as processing and marketing, partly due to societal expectations (Elias et al., 2024; Orth, 2023). The physical demands and hazardous nature of wild-caught marine fisheries may have also traditionally deterred women's participation. Structural barriers and entrenched gender biases have further contributed to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the industry (Elias et al., 2024;



FIGURE 2

NZ women in action. From **(Top left)**: Hayley Baxter on deck in Kaikoura; Chanel Gardner, Executive Officer of the Otago Rock Lobster Fishery; Karen Olver from Seafood New Zealand presenting the Seafood Star Awards 2024. **(Bottom left)** Donna Wells, a governance leader and long-time advocate for women in the commercial fishing industry; Dr. Angela Russell from the New Zealand Rock Lobster Industry Council, operating the CTD oceanography instrument on board RV *Investigator*; and Tamar Wells, Policy Manager Inshore—Seafood NZ, cooking up a storm for the SNZ magazine summer recipe article.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024; Jackson, 2022).

Crucially, women also reported the difficulty of translating their lived experiences of inequity into meaningful policy or workplace change. Respondents emphasized that visibility and professional development are vital for progression, not only to foster individual growth but also to signal that women's contributions are valued. Funding to support these networks was identified as a key enabler for change.

However, whilst challenges persist, respondents emphasized that progress is being made. Increased representation and mentorship were highlighted as critical steps in addressing these challenges, reinforcing women's strength and ongoing influence in shaping the sector's future.

Overcoming barriers, inclusivity, and advice for the next generation

Despite challenges, women in the seafood sector have shown remarkable resilience, emphasizing persistence, mentorship, and self-confidence as critical for overcoming barriers. Chanel Gardner from Otago Rock Lobster Industry Association credited “persistence and patience” for her success. At the same time, Tamar Wells highlighted the importance of proving one's expertise over time: “Eventually, people will trust the quality of your work and start to listen.” Others, like Diane Van Diepen, encouraged women to “Fight harder, be stronger, and find other ways to shine.”

Survey respondents offered practical and motivational advice for newcomers, encouraging them to be proactive, assertive, and

confident in their abilities. Among the most impactful pieces of advice were:

“Go for it. It’s a vibrant and interesting industry to be part of.”

“Don’t take the culture personally; forget ego and get the job done.”

“If you’ve considered it, give it a go. It’s the best job in the world.”

“Be confident that you can make a difference and that there are opportunities for anyone in this industry.”

“Make the most of every opportunity and don’t take “no” for an answer—you can do anything you put your mind to.”

Overall, perspectives on gender inclusivity varied, with some respondents recognizing improvements, particularly increased representation in roles of governance, leadership, research, business management and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Sixty percent felt the industry was becoming more inclusive, aligning with global trends reported by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024. However, others noted that, while there are improvements, persistent gaps remain, particularly concerning the representation of women’s voices in traditionally male-oriented structures. This echoes the findings by Jackson (2022) which identify persistent challenges for women in male-dominated sectors despite improved visibility and leadership.

Women reported holding back from speaking openly about gender inequity due to fears of backlash, being labeled difficult, or facing professional consequences. The absence of psychologically safe environments—where concerns can be voiced without fear—was seen as a key barrier to change. This silence can limit the inclusion of valuable insights in policy and workplace improvements (Edmondson, 2018). Respondents emphasized the need for trusted points of contact or advocates to ensure that women’s experiences are heard and addressed. These views echo broader research on psychological safety, which emphasizes inclusive, risk-free communication as vital for diverse participation and innovation (Edmondson, 2018; Elias et al., 2024).

Respondents positively highlighted flexible working conditions and supportive parental policies, aligning with research by Monfort and Briceño-Lagos (2018), which emphasizes the importance of supportive workplace environments for gender equality. Many women called for further improvements, like formalized knowledge-sharing, stronger visibility in industry forums, and leadership pipelines that reflect the sector’s changing demographics—strategies recognized as vital for supporting women’s advancement globally (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024).

Career milestones and achievements

Women in the seafood industry have overcome barriers and achieved remarkable success throughout their careers. For instance, Donna Wells, owner of Finestkind Limited, reflects on her impressive career: “Thirty-four years in the industry, treasurer of the Port Nelson Fishermen’s Association for 31 years, and 25 years running my own business—it’s been a rewarding journey.”

Other women have also reached significant milestones in the industry. Diane Van Diepen, for example, transitioned from

a processing role on deep-sea trawlers to leadership roles in seafood export operations, ensuring compliance with international regulations and maintaining global trade connections. Joan Bridge has been involved in advocating for sustainability and supporting the local fishing community. Several respondents highlighted their milestones, such as involvement in the Quota Management System (QMS) established in 1986, which reshaped the industry.

In addition to these personal achievements, industry changes have created further opportunities for women. Many respondents emphasized increased representation, particularly in leadership roles, as a crucial factor in fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment. According to the recent FAO report (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2024), the increasing involvement of women in leadership and management roles is critical to the long-term sustainability of fisheries globally.

The future of women in seafood

When asked about desired changes, participants emphasized the need for more women in governance, improved access to training, and stronger support for working mothers. The consistent call for female leadership reflects a clear demand for greater gender balance in decision-making roles across the sector.

Many women highlighted international exposure as a valuable opportunity to amplify their voices by bringing fresh ideas back to New Zealand and strengthening the industry’s growth through global best practices. There is optimism for continued progress toward gender equity. Aspirations centered on leadership, sustainability, and long-term change, ranging from Haley Baxter’s goal of captaining her own vessel to Tamar Wells’ commitment to creating greater certainty in fisheries management to support business investment. These ambitions mark a shift toward roles once unavailable to women and signal a growing potential for women to lead innovation and sustainability across the seafood industry.

Conclusion

Women have made substantial contributions to New Zealand’s seafood sector, finding fulfillment and purpose in roles spanning governance, commercial fishing, aquaculture, processing, trade, and beyond. Their diverse skills and perspectives have driven sustainability, strengthened communities, and helped shape the industry’s innovation and resilience. While progress has been made, gender inequalities persist, and continued advocacy, leadership development, and policy support are essential.

Promoting gender equity is a social and ethical imperative, as well as a strategic priority that supports long-term industry success. By fostering inclusive workplaces, supporting mentorship, and ensuring women’s voices are heard at all levels, the sector will continue to benefit from their strength, insight, and leadership.

Wild-caught marine fisheries have traditionally deterred women due to physical demands and hazardous conditions. However, advancements in health and safety standards, combined with technological innovations such as enhanced processing techniques, digital platforms, and mobile technologies, create

safer and more efficient environments. These innovations have empowered women to participate in direct marketing and sales, expanding their roles across the seafood value chain (Gopal et al., 2020). Still, women remain underrepresented in technology-driven positions, including advanced fishing operations and aquaculture technology development. Addressing this requires gender-sensitive training, equitable access to tools and resources, and deliberate efforts to challenge traditional gender norms (Elias et al., 2024).

Up-to-date gender statistics are needed in New Zealand's seafood sector to inform inclusive policymaking. Disaggregated data can help illuminate women's participation, needs, and priorities across the industry, enabling more responsive and equitable strategies. This includes recognizing the contributions of Māori and non-Māori women, particularly Māori women's leadership in *kaitiakitanga* and customary fishing practices. Their roles are vital to sustainable marine management; however, there is no recent, NZ-specific, gender-disaggregated data for the seafood workforce. A 2014 FAO report (Lambeth et al., 2014) estimated that women comprised around 34% of the Pacific region's fisheries workforce—a figure often cited in the absence of national data. Without more current and localized insights, women's knowledge and influence risk being under-recognized, especially in areas like conservation and local co-management, where their contributions are often informal, culturally embedded, and less formally documented. This paper helps address that data gap by presenting findings from our 2024 survey of women across the seafood value chain.

Significantly, while over 2,700 women were invited to participate, only 37 completed the survey. The low response rate likely reflects more than survey fatigue. It may signal deeper structural and cultural barriers within the sector. Some women may have been hesitant to participate due to concerns about confidentiality, fear of professional repercussions, or uncertainty about how their responses would be used. Others may not have seen the survey as relevant to their experience, particularly if working in informal, voluntary, or part-time positions, or customary roles. Time pressures and lack of access through trusted or familiar networks may have also limited engagement. While the sample size does not allow for broad quantitative generalization, the survey has not indicated a strong upward trend in female representation since the study in 2014 (see Lambeth et al., 2014). Most participants described working in traditionally gendered roles (e.g., administration, processing, environmental management), and few reported movements into senior leadership, governance, or operational harvesting positions. This suggests that structural gender imbalances may persist. Compared to countries such as Norway, Canada and to a lesser extent Iceland, which have implemented structured gender equity strategies, consistent monitoring, and gender-responsive fisheries governance (Chuenpagdee and Jentoft, 2018; Frangoudes et al., 2019; Government of Canada, 2024), New Zealand lacks a coordinated national reporting framework or targeted gender equity policies within the seafood sector. These findings underscore the importance of designing future research in ways that are culturally safe, trusted, and responsive to the lived realities of women in the sector. Building partnerships with Māori, Pacific, and industry groups and embedding co-design principles into data collection will be key to improving participation and capturing

a more complete picture of gender equity in Aotearoa's seafood industry. Significantly, future research should also move beyond binary gender categories to explicitly include non-binary and gender-diverse participants, ensuring all individuals in the seafood workforce are recognized and represented in both policy and data.

Despite ongoing challenges, however, women in the sector remain optimistic. Their aspirations, whether to lead vessels, shape fisheries policy, or transform business practices, signal a shift toward greater inclusion in roles once considered out of reach. Many advocated for greater international exposure to amplify their voices and bring global insights back to NZ, thereby elevating the country's seafood sector. These women's substantial experience is critical in driving sustainability and resource management, as well as mentoring the next generation. Their achievements and insights are central to understanding gender equity in the industry and identifying pathways forward.

In conclusion, the path to gender equity in New Zealand's seafood sector is ongoing; however, the progress, resilience, and ambition of women serve as a guiding light. By investing in inclusive policies informed by up-to-date gender statistics, mentorship, leadership development, and equitable access to resources, the NZ industry can unlock its full potential and build a future that honors the contributions of all its members.

Ethics statement

This voluntary, non-sensitive survey of women in Aotearoa New Zealand's seafood sector did not require formal institutional ethics approval under national guidelines. All participants whose names, quotes, or images appear in this manuscript provided informed consent via email. Written records of consent are securely stored and available upon request. No identifying information is published without explicit permission, and all data were handled confidentially.

Author contributions

AR: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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