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Rethinking assumptions: navigating gender equality in the seafood sector

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Introduction

After touring an Alaskan fish processing plant on a recent work trip, a seafood industry colleague pulled me aside and said, “It must be difficult to find connections between gender equality and fish processing.” I responded that, in fact, there is a connection between gender and every part of the seafood supply chain and briefly mentioned the gendered breakdown of who I saw working in the processing plant and where. As a professor in my gender and development graduate studies program once told me: “Everything is gendered.”

Challenging long-held assumptions about gender, women’s rights, and gender equality has been the crux of my career for over 15 years, and I have witnessed the public’s ideological pendulum swing from critical inquiry to engagement to repudiation, and back again. My career has spanned numerous contexts including advocating for survivors of gender-based violence, promoting health equity in rural Peruvian communities, researching the gendered impacts of grant funding on feminist organizations, and my current role directing programs for the U.S.-based nonprofit organization Seafood and Gender Equality (SAGE).

While I have consistently worked at the intersections of feminism, violence prevention, gender equity, and antiracism, I was admittedly very new to the seafood sector when I began my role at SAGE two and a half year ago. I assumed that articulating the case for gender equality in the seafood sector would follow a similar pattern as articulating the case for improved survivor advocacy services on a college campus: Identify stakeholders, build relationships and rapport, conduct various needs assessments to better understand the complexity of the issue, build an action and program plan, and so on. However, the seafood sector proved to be more complicated than I thought. This article explores that complexity, which includes challenging my assumptions when shifting to a corporate focus after many years spent in the nonprofit sector. In this piece, I’ll discuss my background before moving on to the current programs I oversee at SAGE and the trends I’ve noticed while promoting gender equality in the sector. From there, I’ll speak about some of the challenges and catalysts I’ve noticed thus far, and ultimately, I’ll outline some of the changes I hope to see as the sector positions itself to face the significant obstacles of navigating climate change, a shifting economy and political landscape, and an aging workforce.

Seafood and Gender Equality (SAGE): our programs and mission

As a gender practitioner, I am trained to see the intersections of gender, power, race, identity, and history in every institution, organization, and movement. The sustainable

seafood movement is no exception. We know, for example, that while women comprise 50% of the global seafood workforce, we are not often in positions of power or in spaces where decisions are made (FAO, 2022). We also know from other sectors that when women have access to resources and leadership roles, organizations increase their profit margins, better carry out their sustainability commitments, and retain more employees over time (European Investment, 2022; Hunt et al., 2018). Essentially, promoting gender equality within seafood companies and supply chains creates and sustains workplaces that attract the incoming generation of employees. Further, promoting gender equality within a company boosts innovation and improves a company's retention rate; both critical components of keeping a workforce engaged (Hewlett and Marshall, 2013). Gender equality is also a human right. Gender is a spectrum that includes men, women, transgender, and non-binary people so when we speak about gender equality, we speak about easing the rigid gender norms and understanding the gendered socialization that we all live and breathe, regardless of our gender. In other words, gender equality isn't just about supporting women. The ability to show up to work as one's full self and to be seen and valued for who we are, regardless of our identity, is an incredibly valuable concept. In a society where we spend so much of our lives as employees, we want to work in places that see our well-being as a worthwhile endeavor.

I began working at SAGE two and a half years ago as the Program Manager for our flagship program, the Gender Equality Dialogues (GED). That program has now been incorporated into our larger Gender Strategies branch, of which I am currently the Director. This branch encompasses our new Gender Equality Assessments and Recommendations (GEAR) Initiative, in addition to the GED. Currently, both programs center on promoting gender equality specifically within North American seafood companies and nonprofits. The GED is a curriculum-based program where representatives from Human Resources, Operations, and Sustainability departments in various seafood companies and organizations come together over 12 sessions to learn what it takes to build a gender transformative seafood sector.

Being gender transformative requires that companies assess the dynamics that are bubbling beneath the surface and identify and carry out measurable and meaningful actions to change structures that reinforce inequities. We support this in the GED by building skills in awareness and gender analysis, culminating in participants developing a company-wide commitment and action plan for gender equality which can include revamping an existing policy, building a new policy, or incorporating a new company-wide practice or initiative (i.e., expanding a maternity leave policy into a broader parental leave policy). In the GED, companies commit to learning in public, meaning they are in a virtual setting alongside representatives from other companies with whom they are naturally in competition. As the facilitator, I actively foster a container of accountability, trust, and pre-competitive collaboration. Our GEAR Initiative, while thematically similar, offers companies and organizations the opportunity to complete a self-assessment with our Gender Equity Index tool and receive a bespoke Gender Action Plan and consultation services aimed at improving their Gender Equity Index score over time.

SAGE is a grant-funded nonprofit with a mission to uplift, amplify, and integrate diverse voices into the seafood sector. While some view the importance of gender equality in the seafood sector as pale in comparison to the incredibly complex issues of climate change, workforce development, and labor rights, at SAGE, we understand that the forces that create and sustain those broader challenges are often the main contributing factors to social and gender inequity. These forces—capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—are not only nebulous to pin down and define, but also difficult to bring to a level where seafood executives and sustainable seafood nonprofit organizations can see the implications of those injustices in their day-to-day operations and make plans to address them. Additionally, gender has personal, professional, and political ramifications for every single person and, depending on the other identities which we hold, including race, nationality, immigration status, class, and ability, those ramifications can be drastically intensified. Combined, these elements point to SAGE's mission as a critical one. To achieve it, we must engage with and deeply understand the realities that seafood companies and organizations face.

Challenges in promoting gender equality in the seafood sector

In addition to climate change and an aging workforce, the seafood sector is facing economic uncertainty wrought by tariffs and funding cuts, including defunding programs that support gender equality, diversity, equity, and inclusion. While these contribute to the obstacles SAGE faces as companies tighten their budget and become less willing to take a public stance on equity, barriers were well in place before the current administration came to power. Since beginning my tenure with SAGE, I have noticed that many companies view promoting gender equality and participating in our programs as a “nice-to-have”, a sidestream endeavor that can be completed only when a company is not experiencing internal or external turbulence. We often hear that not only do companies not have the resources (time, personnel, political will) to dedicate to our programming; some also believe they are already excelling at gender equality because they have a few women in leadership, or because they hire incoming staff based on qualifications or merit and not specifically based on gender—insinuating that if there aren't women in management or C-Suite roles, it's because they either aren't qualified or aren't applying.

Responding to these obstacles means taking an expansive view of what's possible so that we can slowly orient the sector toward becoming a gender transformative one. Much of our messaging centers on the fact that gender is a spectrum and that promoting gender equality doesn't mean only uplifting women. We know that most seafood companies and organizations do not have policies that explicitly discuss the needs of genderqueer, trans, or non-binary individuals. We also know that these individuals exist and that centering those most at the margins will uplift everyone else in the process. A rising tide lifts all boats. For example, offering mental health coverage with a virtual platform that matches therapists with patients based on their identity will support employees who are genderqueer individuals and people of color. It will also

support employees who are middle-aged white men, a group that is currently experiencing some of the highest suicide rates in the United States (Centers for Disease and Prevention, 2024).

Further, a large portion of the GED curriculum focuses on company culture and workforce development to combat the misguided notion that there are fewer women in the industry because they either aren't qualified or they aren't applying for roles. We ask companies to conduct various culture assessments and evaluate deeply embedded, less visible, and often involuntary attitudes such as implicit bias, and to analyze their recruiting, advertising, and marketing materials to discover where that implicit bias might show up.

Conclusion: hope, progress, and questioning my own assumptions

Building a gender transformative seafood sector is a daunting task that simultaneously demands a bird's eye view of the issues, sustained attention to detail, and an abundance of grace. Step by step, however, progress is being made. When I first entered the sector, I wrongly assumed that the industry would be disengaged, prioritizing profit over collective care. As the author and activist adrienne maree brown notes, "what we pay attention to grows" (Brown, 2018). I came into this sector with the impression that it was stubborn, male-dominated, and victim to binary thinking. I do think that the more we pay attention to those negative attributes, the more light and space we give them. I have been greatly surprised by the sector's nimbleness and by the individual stories I hear about transformation and hope, and of building an industry that welcomes the next generation. In conferences and meetings, men, women, and genderqueer people have shared with me their stories of not only the difficulties they've encountered but the support, advocacy, and success they've experienced along the way.

In our programming, I have witnessed corporate representatives speak fluently about the need to foster collective care by building and maintaining equitable policies, and I have experienced these same folks be open to dialogue and facilitation that includes trust building, accountability, and reflective engagement. Despite these obstacles, or perhaps because of them, individuals and companies are finding a way to nudge the door open to a transformative and equitable seafood sector. They are willing to come together to learn alongside their competitors, to be curious and open to trying something new, or to trying something again. This is a sector of doers, made up of people who see the gaps and want to do something about them, people willing to do the

work to keep that door ajar so that future generations can more easily step through it.

At a recent global conference, I heard a Latin American union leader speak about the gender inclusive policies his union implemented decades ago. "Give it time", he said, "we started navigating these issues 20 years ago and have only recently begun to see big changes." This is my hope for the seafood sector: That we can continue to navigate these waters in the coming years despite the rough conditions. We don't all need to be going at the same speed or even moving in the same boat, so long as we're flowing in one current, oriented toward the same gender transformative horizon.

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