The Role of Women in the small-scale fishery sector in South Africa: the case of St Helena Bay

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"A fishing operation may be viewed as an open-theatre drama where women play critical roles staying behind the screen. They usually remain unobserved by the frontline audience; the queen tackles the regiments alone when the king is outside" – Pronoti Jaladas, 50, caste-based Hindu fisherwoman, Thakurtala.

"I am a daughter. I am a wife. I am a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a sister-in-law. I am a nurse who heals. I am a prayer. I am a teacher. But what I love most is to be a fisher" – Rosey Shoshola, 4th generation fisher, Fish with A Story film

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To the incredible fisherwomen of St Helena Bay, who made the time to chat with me and shared their stories, this work would not be possible without you. Your grit and willpower to fight for gender equity in the small-scale fisheries sector is an inspiration.

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Abstract

Small-scale fisheries are a cornerstone of coastal livelihoods, food security, and cultural heritage worldwide, supporting millions of people and contributing significantly to global fish production. These fisheries are inherently diverse, involving a wide range of activities from harvesting and processing to marketing of the catch. However, the contributions of women in small-scale fisheries remain largely invisible within mainstream narratives, policies, plans and development initiatives. Across the globe, and in South Africa, women play critical roles that often extend beyond traditional value chain activities, including leadership in community networks, advocacy for sustainable practices, and informal resource management. Despite this, their efforts are frequently under recognised, undervalued, and they are largely excluded from decision-making processes.

This research explored the different roles and contributions of women in all aspects of the St Helena Bay small-scale fisheries sector, moving beyond the conventional view of women's involvement as confined to pre- and post-harvest activities. Employing a gendered lens and grounded in qualitative fieldwork, the study adopted a case study approach and used semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights. A total of 17 women involved in various parts of the small-scale fisheries value chain were interviewed. The research examined the factors that influence their full participation in the sector and considered pathways for enhancing gender equity in the small-scale fisheries sector.

In St Helena Bay, women engage in diverse roles that traverse the traditional fisheries value chain. Beyond their involvement in pre-harvest preparation and post-harvest processing, women serve as caregivers, leaders, knowledge holders and custodians of the ocean. Despite these multifaceted contributions, women face systemic challenges such as marginalisation, economic precarity, and inadequate representation in policy and decision-making processes. These realities underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of their vital contributions to the sector and a reimagining of their position within the fisheries value chain.

The findings reveal that women play a critical role in the fisheries value chain and their contributions are integral not only to the sustainability and resilience of small-scale fisheries but also to their broader socio-economic fabric of their community. However, they face significant

challenges including economic hardships, limited support from government, onerous permitting conditions, and no social protection.

This study underscores the urgent need for inclusive governance and targeted support mechanisms that recognise and enhance the contributions of women in fisheries. By reimagining the value chain through a gender-inclusive perspective, this research recommends pathways that could enhance gender equity in small-scale fisheries in St Helena Bay and more broadly, in South Africa.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAAF	Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
DFFE	Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
DEAT	Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism
MLRA	Marine Living Resources Act (18 of 1998)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SSF	Small-Scale Fishery
SSFP	Small-Scale Fisheries Policy
UCT	University of Cape Town

1. Understanding the Role of Women in Small-scale Fisheries

1.1 Introduction

Fishing is an ancient way of food gathering that has been vital for the sustenance and healthy living of many communities over the centuries. Nowadays, the economic value of fish frequently outweighs that of traditional agricultural products like rice and sugar, making fishing especially significant in emerging nations (FAO, 2022; FAO *et al.,* 2023). By 2050, the world's population is predicted to reach 9.7 billion, with major increases taking place in areas reliant on agriculture, which includes forestry, fisheries, livestock, and crops (UN, 2019). This emphasizes how important the fishing industry is to future food security and economic stability, particularly in regions with fast population increase.

Small-scale fisheries (hereafter SSFs) are diverse, low-capital, and labour-intensive fishing activities, typically carried out by coastal and inland communities using traditional or small-scale methods (Allison and Ellis, 2001). Small-scale fisheries are not only a substantial part of the global fish catch, accounting for at least 40 percent, but are also a crucial source of employment, engaging approximately 60.2 million people, representing about 90 percent of the workforce in the fisheries sector worldwide (FAO, 2020). In 2016, these fisheries supported about 53 million more people, making them especially important for subsistence activities (FAO *et al.,* 2023). An estimated 200 million people in Africa alone depend on marine and inland fisheries for their food security (Béné and Heck, 2005; Sowman and Cardoso, 2010; March and Failler, 2022).

The 30,490 km of coastline around the African continent is home to numerous small-scale traditional fishing communities, with estimates suggesting that around 12.3 million people are employed in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, of which 50 percent are fishers, 42 percent are processors and 8 percent are fish farmers (Union, 2014). Large lakes across the continent also serve as vital food and livelihood supplies for a large number of inland villages. About 10 million people in Africa's coastal and interior regions are thought to depend on small-scale fishing as their main source of income, while another 90 million do the same as part of a diversified livelihood strategy (Raemaekers & Sunde, 2015; FAO *et al.*, 2023).

At present, thousands of small-scale fishers operate along the South African coastline, ranging from the shore-based harvesting of intertidal resources such as mussels to the targeting of

migratory line-fish stocks using small, motorised vessels (Sowman and Sunde, 2024). In addition, several hundred fishers are engaged in harvesting fish resources from various inland dams although there is limited information on these fisheries (Isaacs *et al.,* 2022). Small-scale fisheries in South Africa thus play a crucial role in contributing to food security and providing livelihood and employment to thousands of people despite various challenges facing the sector such as limited resource access and weak government support (Macdonald, 2019; Sowman and Sunde, 2020).

Although men dominate both small-scale and industrial fisheries, women play a central, but often invisible, role in the industry (Thorpe *et al.,* 2014). In the small-scale sector, their work along the seashore, at the landing sites, in the community and within their households significantly contributes towards the fisheries value chain, despite this often not being recognised as work (Harper *et al*., 2013; Raemaekers *et al.,* 2016; Branch and Kleiber*,* 2017; Fonto, 2021). The entire spectrum of operations involved in the production, processing, marketing, and distribution of fish is referred to as the fisheries value chain. From harvesting to ultimate consumption, it includes every step that enhances the value of fish and items associated to fisheries (FAO, 2013).

The invisibility of women's labour in the small-scale fishing sector is a world-wide phenomenon (Sunde, 2010). In South Africa, as in many parts of the world, patriarchy is the dominant social system, creating power imbalances that favour men and shape gender relations in distinct ways (Mshweshwe, 2020). This implies that a large portion of the labour that women in small-scale fishing communities perform for the market, at home, and in their communities is unappreciated and undervalued. In addition to these important but frequently unseen contributions, women are essential to fisheries management and governance (FAO *et al.,* 2023; Oloko *et al*., 2025). They fight for fair rules and practices in the industry, provide traditional ecological knowledge that improves resource sustainability, and take part in decision-making processes that affect fisheries. Despite these efforts, official frameworks for fisheries management often ignore or undervalue their participation in governance, which reinforces structural gender disparities. Recognising and integrating their efforts into formal fisheries management systems is essential for achieving socially just and sustainable fisheries (Kleiber *et al*., 2019; de la Torre-Castro, 2019; Harper *et al*., 2020; FAO, 2022; Mahmud *et al*., 2025).

Women also have limited access to training, infrastructure, and technology that could strengthen the SSF sector. Most importantly, they are not consulted equally in decision-making processes and remain politically and economically marginalised. Unequal and often oppressive

gender relations may shape how they are treated by men in their homes, in the community, in the workplace and by government (Choo, 2004; UN Women, 2015)

Yet, despite this marginalisation, women from small-scale and artisanal fishing communities have participated very actively in the struggles for the recognition of small-scale fishers, notably contributing their knowledge and inputs at key international fisher forums, in national fisher movements and in local fisher struggles (Raemaekers & Sunde, 2015). Their engagements include significant contributions at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) – which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa from August 26 to September 4, 2002 – articulating their priorities in the Bangkok Statement and actively participating in the drafting of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (hereafter SSF Guidelines) (FAO, 2015a). These efforts highlight their vital role in influencing international fisheries regulations and promoting the rights and acknowledgement of women and other small-scale fishers. However, there are still very few empirical studies, especially in places like Africa and South Africa, despite the fact that academic research, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society organisations (CSOs) are beginning to recognize this underappreciated significance. This is hampered by the continued patriarchal nature of social relations and institutions at all levels of the fishing industry, including within the social movement of fishers (Frangoudes & Gerrard, 2018; Galappaththi *et al*., 2022). While fishermen's knowledge and contributions are increasingly being recognised and considered in management decisions, fisherwomen's traditional and social-ecological knowledge remains largely neglected (Raemaekers *et al.*, 2016; Calhoun *et al*., 2016).

The global fishing industry exhibits a strong gender-based division of labour, where men typically engage in fishing at sea, while women handle post-harvest processing. This distinction has led to fisheries management strategies that primarily focus on men for fishing and resource management programs, while viewing women mainly as processors and marketers of the catch (FAO, 2015). As a result, there is a widespread misconception that women play only a minor role in fisheries economies. However, both genders contribute significantly to the sector, often in ways that are more complex and deeply rooted in cultural traditions than commonly acknowledged. This rigid perception of gender roles has influenced the design of small-scale fisheries (SSF) initiatives, frequently leading to the undervaluation of women's crucial roles in fisheries resource management and policy-making (Lentisco & Lee, 2015).

In the small-scale fishing sector, women are most involved in the post-harvest sector (FAO *et al.,* 2023), while at the same time being the main caregivers of the fishing household, responsible for food security and often for the family finances (Fisheries, 2010; Harper *et al*., 2017). However, despite the importance of the post-harvest and livelihood support that women provide, they remain absent in areas most relevant for their empowerment, such as resource management, decision-making, access rights and access to markets (FAO, 2015).

In India for example, fisheries are a dynamic and diversified sector. Due to a cultural taboo, among other reasons, women typically don't go fishing in boats, nevertheless, once the offshore catch is landed, women are heavily involved in the cleaning, drying, curing, salting and marketing of the catch. It is estimated that nearly 50% of Indian fisheries workers are women, and yet, their work is often unpaid (FAO, 2015; Ogden, 2017). In Kerala, for example, there is a black clam (*Villorita cyprinoides*) fishery, which was traditionally dominated by women who would dive for and handpick these clams. In recent years, men have taken over the harvesting. Clam fishermen are organized in associations and issued licenses to fish from the state government, while women are denied the right to fish (Ogden, 2017). Similar examples of gender inequality in small-scale fisheries have been documented in England (Zhao *et al*., 2013), Brazil (Santos, 2015), Pakistan (Shah, 2012), and several other coastal countries.

In South Africa, women have long been essential contributors to small-scale fishing communities, yet their efforts often go unacknowledged (Sunde, 2010). From the harvesting and processing of marine resources to working in fish processing plants, women have always made important contributions to sustaining livelihoods in coastal communities, apart from caring for their families and other community members (Harris *et al.*, 2002; van Sittert *et al.,* 2006; Schultz, 2010; Minnaar, 2022). Whilst the South African Constitution recognizes women's rights and goes as far as including an Equality Clause clearly stating that "everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), the reality in small-scale fishing communities looks rather different (Masifundise 2008; Sunde, 2010).

This research argues that understanding and recognising the complex and dynamic roles and activities fisherwomen play in the SSF sector's entire value chain and identifying factors that mitigate against their full involvement in the sector is critical for preserving traditional coastal livelihoods, as well as moving towards a socially just and ecologically responsible management of fisheries. It is impossible to comprehend and manage small-scale fisheries sustainably without

taking gender into account, and doing so necessitates addressing the lack data of women fishers in the already scant statistics on these fisheries (FAO *et al.,* 2023). This study uses a case study methodology to examine and improve knowledge of the various roles and contributions made by women in every facet of the value chain of the small-scale fishing industry. It examines the barriers to their full participation in the industry and looks at measures to improve gender equity in South Africa's small-scale fishing industry.

1.2 Rationale for the study

This research is dedicated to exploring the multifaceted roles and contributions of women within the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector in South Africa. Women's participation in SSF is critical yet often under recognised, spanning from pre-harvest activities to post-harvest processes. The overarching aim is to better understand how gender influences the access to, use and management of fisheries resources, thereby unveiling both the contributions of women and barriers they face within this sector.

Because so many women work in the fishing industry, both legally and informally, the town of St. Helena Bay in South Africa's Western Cape was selected as a study site (Figure 1). Located approximately 150 km north of Cape Town, St Helena Bay is widely known as the heart of South Africa's pelagic fishing industry and has a long-standing tradition of fishing that predates colonisation. The area has supported indigenous subsistence practices, industrialised commercial fisheries, and more recently, state-recognised small-scale fisheries. Today, it is home to a vibrant yet vulnerable coastal community, where many women have historically played essential roles in sustaining both fisheries and household economies (Sunde *et al.,* 2024).

Figure 1. The town of St Helena Bay in the context of South Africa

This study looks at the roles that women play in this community, both currently and in the past, to emphasize their vital contributions along the whole SSF value chain – from gleaning and fish processing to net mending, marketing, advocacy, and caregiving. These roles are embedded within a complex history of dispossession, marginalisation, and resistance, shaped by colonialism, apartheid, and economic transformation. In this context, women have long had to negotiate their access to marine resources, navigate shifting policy environments, and assert their roles in a sector where their labour remains undervalued.

Furthermore, this study aims to identify the factors that limit or facilitate women's participation and leadership in this sector. By understanding the intricacies of the local fishing industry – its evolution over time, community structures and present-day challenges - we can gain insights into the lived realities of women in this area and explore concrete pathways to enhancing gender equity in the small-scale fisheries sector.

By exploring these roles and the complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental factors that shape them, the study will contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of gender dynamics in the SSF fisheries sector in St Helena Bay. This will not only aid in recognising and valuing women's contributions but will also assist in informing policy and management strategies aimed at creating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable fisheries.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this research project was to examine the different roles and contributions of women in all aspects of the St Helena Bay SSF value chain, understand the factors that influence their participation in the sector and consider pathways for enhancing gender equity in the sector.

The objectives were:

1) To review the role of women in the SSF value chain, from an international to local scale, with a particular focus on the Western Cape of South Africa.
2) To examine the policy and legal framework relevant to SSFs in South Africa and the extent to which it recognises and enables fisherwomen (or not).
3) To investigate the roles that women play in the SSFs value chain – from pre to post harvest stages – based on an in-depth case study of the St Helena Bay SSF fishery system.
4) To explore the factors that have affected women's access to, use and management of fisheries resources.
5) Based on the case study investigation, elucidate the potential contribution of women to the SSFs value chain and its management and identify pathways for enhancing gender equity in the SSFs sector in South Africa.

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study. This involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fisherwomen from St Helena Bay, focusing on their lived experiences and perspectives. Additionally, a review of relevant published and grey literature was undertaken to contextualize the findings within existing frameworks on small-scale fisheries governance and gender roles. The in-depth interviews provided a nuanced understanding of the complex roles that women contribute to the SSF sector, facilitating a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics and challenges faced by fisherwomen in the region.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This dissertation contains seven chapters. The first chapter provides a general overview of the topic, including an introduction and background to the study, the overall aim and objectives of the study, limitations to the study and ethical considerations. Chapter Two reviews and discusses

the literature relevant to small-scale fisheries worldwide but with a specific focus on South Africa and women in fisheries. It explores the policy and legal framework of SSFs in South Africa and examines the challenges facing women in fisheries and considers proposals for enhancing equity in the sector. Chapter Three presents the research methodology, providing a description of the methods used for data collection and data analysis. Chapter Four gives an overview of the study site, focusing on the development of the fisheries sector in St Helena Bay and the role of women in the sector over time.

Chapter Five presents the research findings, while Chapter Six discusses the key themes that have emerged from the research and elucidates the role and potential contributions of women in the small-scale fisheries value chain and its management. The discussion concludes with recommendations of factors that need to be addressed to ensure that women's contributions to the fishery value chain are recognised and valued and equity on the sector is promoted and finally, Chapter Seven provides the conclusion and final reflections of the study.

2. Literature Review: Exploring the Role of Women in SSFs

2.1 Introduction

Marine and coastal capture fisheries are one of the most important activities for coastal populations around the world. Is it estimated that ninety percent of the people directly employed in fishing and aquaculture are small-scale fishers who are dependent on inland as well as coastal fishery resources for their livelihoods and food security (Loring *et al*., 2019; FAO, 2020). According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), an estimated 58.5 million people were involved in the primary sector of capture fisheries and aquaculture in 2020, of which 21% were women (FAO, 2020). When including the secondary sector (pre-harvest activities, such as net-making and –repair and bait preparation, as well as post-harvest tasks, including fish processing, vending, and distribution), women made up about half of the workforce (FAO, 2015).

Small-scale fisheries play a crucial role in poverty reduction and food security yet are often overlooked and undervalued in management and policy. By extension, women, as major participants in small-scale fisheries, play a fundamental role in fisheries development and production. However, their contribution to the entire fisheries value chain and governance processes remains largely misunderstood and significantly undervalued. Thus, inclusion of women in decision- and policy-making processes is key to developing appropriate strategies for poverty alleviation and food security in light of changing global conditions (Harper *et al*., 2013; de la Torre-Castro, 2019). A recent review of 189 studies shows that gender inequality in SSFs intersects with climate change and IUU fishing, systematically constraining women's adaptive capacities and underscoring the need to integrate gender into fisheries governance for equity and resilience (Oloko *et al*., 2025).

Various initiatives and programs have highlighted the significant role of women in fisheries, primarily emphasizing their involvement in processing and marketing. Government policies have further reinforced the perception that women's primary role lies within the processing sector (FAO, 2015). Recognising this issue, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 and the SSF Guidelines (2015) explicitly integrate gender equality as a fundamental principle (FAO, 2015a). To achieve more equitable and sustainable management of fisheries resources, the

role played by women in all aspects of the fisheries value chain must be recognised, and women must be involved in the planning, management and decision-making processes (FAO, 2015a).

Recent discussions also emphasise that while recognition of women's roles has improved, structural biases and gender blindness persist across the sector. The Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section (GAFS) has been instrumental in advancing knowledge on these issues, advocating for the integration of women's contributions across the fish value chain and highlighting the persistent undercounting of women in official statistics (Williams *et al*., 2025).

Women's traditional responsibilities as food growers and caregivers connect them more closely to the availability of natural resources (Harper *et al.,* 2013). This literature review will explore the roles of women in fisheries, highlighting how their contributions extend beyond the traditional value chain roles typically associated with the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector. It highlights the main factors preventing women fishers from fully participating in the fisheries value chain and documents the key challenges they encounter in the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector. It then provides a concise overview of the evolution of the South African fishing industry, examining the legal reforms implemented post-1994 to transform the sector and recognise the SSFs as a legal sector. The chapter concludes with a review of relevant literature on strategies to promote gender equity within small-scale fisheries, offering insights into potential pathways for more inclusive and sustainable fisheries governance.

2.2 Small-Scale Fisheries Sector

2.2.1 Introduction

Considering their diversity and dynamism, the FAO Working Group on Small-Scale Fisheries (FAO, 2005) concluded that it is not possible or useful to have a universal definition of small-scale fisheries. Instead, small-scale fisheries can broadly be characterised as a "dynamic and evolving sector employing labour intensive harvesting, processing and distribution technologies to exploit marine and inland water fishery resources" (FAO, 2005, p.4). Small-scale fisheries are labour intensive, employ low-tech equipment, usually operate within 12 nautical miles from shore, and primarily supply local markets (Isaacs *et al*. 2022).

The importance of fisheries, especially small-scale fisheries, as a source of nutrition, employment and income for many of the world's coastal and rural poor can hardly be overestimated (Béné, 2006; Béné *et al.,* 2007; Allison, 2011). Small-scale fisheries are more than

just a subsector of the economy; they define the livelihoods and culture of a substantial and diverse segment of humankind. An estimated 27.5 million people are employed either part-time or full-time in the harvesting segment of the SSF value chain globally, while an additional 52.8 million people worldwide engage in subsistence activities such as harvesting and processing, representing nearly 46.7 percent of all individuals involved in small-scale fisheries (FAO *et al.,* 2023). Millions of people depend on these subsistence activities, which are sometimes unreported and informal, for their livelihoods and vital nutrition, especially in inland and coastal communities where there are few other work options (FAO *et al*., 2023).

About 200 million people in Africa depend on marine and inland small-scale fisheries to support their livelihoods and ensure food security, helping to meet their nutritional needs (Béné, 2003; Béné & Heck, 2005). As a major source of protein and vital micronutrients, especially for low-income communities, these fisheries not only directly employ people but also contribute significantly to the continent's overall fish consumption, highlighting their critical role in food security strategies (FAO *et al.,* 2023).

Although the precise economic impact of small-scale fisheries on impoverished coastal communities in developing countries remains largely unknown, they are believed to serve as a crucial "safety net" during periods of economic hardship, poor harvests, and other conditions that increase vulnerability (Allison & Ellis, 2001; FAO, 2005; FAO *et al*., 2023). The well-being of small-scale fishing communities, in terms of poverty alleviation and food security, depends heavily on both the benefits derived from fisheries resources and access to essential support services for their livelihoods (Jentoft *et al.,* 2010). To optimize the benefits of marine resources, fisheries institutions are increasingly adopting decentralized and context-specific management approaches, such as co-management, to facilitate policy implementation while addressing key issues like poverty and food security (Jentoft *et al.,* 2010).

2.2.2 Small-scale fisheries in South Africa

Throughout the South African coastline, men, woman, and children have been living in small coastal communities harvesting marine resources for consumption, livelihoods, medicinal purposes, and often also as part of cultural and spiritual practices for generations (Branch, 2002; Branch *et al*., 2002; Sunde & Raemaekers, 2010). A diversity of small-scale fishers operate along the South African coast from boat-based fishing on the West Coast to intertidal harvesting on the East Coast. Small-scale fisheries in South Africa have been defined by the Department of

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) (now the Department of Forestry, Fisheries & the Environment (DFFE)) as "persons that fish to meet basic livelihood needs or are directly involved in harvesting/processing or marketing of fish, traditionally operate on/near the fishing grounds, predominantly employ traditional low technology or passive fishing gear, usually undertake single day fishing trips and are engaged in the sale or barter or involved in commercial activity" (DAFF, 2012). The total number of fishers engaged in this sector, including men, women and youth, is not known, since the legal definition of what constitutes a SSF is narrowly defined and excludes various fishers who were overlooked in the fishing rights allocation process or who participate in fishing as part of a suite of livelihood activities (Sowman & Sunde, 2021). Moreover, the management of small-scale fisheries has primarily prioritised ecological and economic objectives, often overlooking the livelihoods of those dependent on them. As a result, the human dimension of the fishery system in small-scale fishing communities remains largely underexplored (Hauck & Sowman, 2003; Glavovic & Boonzaier, 2007; Hauck, 2008).

Long before fisheries in South Africa became industrialised, they served as a vital source of livelihood for coastal communities (Sunde *et al.,* 2013). Although little documentation exists on the fishing practices of indigenous peoples before industrialization, historical records suggest diverse activities along the country's 3,000-kilometer coastline. These included boat-based fishing on the west coast (van Sittert, 1992) and shore-based and line fishing on the east coast (Sunde *et al.,* 2013). After slavery was abolished in the 1800s, many freed slaves and their families migrated to the Cape, and with the colonial government's increasing demand for fish, numerous fishing settlements were established along the coastline (van Sittert, 1992). On the east coast, many fishers were nomadic pastoralists and herders who supplemented their livelihoods by collecting shellfish and catching certain line fish species (Sunde, 2014). In these coastal areas, distant from colonial administrative centres, fishers continued to access and manage marine resources in accordance with African customary law (Sunde, 2014).

Marine fisheries underwent a major transformation by the early 1990s, with British capital sponsoring the industrialisation of the South African fisheries in the first few decades of the 20th century (Crosoer *et al.,* 2006). However, beginning in the mid-1930s, the national government gained some control over the rapidly developing commercial fishing industry (van Sittert *et al.,* 2006), introducing several legislative mechanisms, as well as the individual quota system, which strengthened white monopoly over important marine resources and consolidated wealth in the hands of a few large white-owned corporations. The shift to export production after 1945 further

facilitated the accumulation of capital by only a few companies (Crosoer *et al.,* 2006). International interest in the fisheries sector increased during the post-war growth period, but competition with foreign vessels, particularly for hake resources, intensified. South Africa was only able to prevent foreign vessels from fishing in its waters after the declaration of the Exclusive Economic Zone in 1977 (Menon *et al.,* 2018).

Although the post-apartheid socioeconomic policy included socialist elements (ANC, 1994) and aimed to address inequalities in social services, poverty, and historical injustices, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC)-led government opted to reintegrate with the global capitalist economy and implement neoliberal economic policies after South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 (Menon *et al*., 2018). This shift toward neoliberalism led to an alliance between industry and labour, where fishing crews and fish workers aligned with large industries in opposing state-led redistribution of resources to traditional fishers (Nielsen & Hara, 2006). Instead, the focus was placed on Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiatives within the established industry to meet transformation objectives. However, small-scale fishers were largely excluded from these processes due to a lack of organization and representation in policy discussions. These negotiations ultimately resulted in the development of a fisheries policy (DEAT, 2006) and the enactment of the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) in 1998.

A key goal of the MLRA was to reallocate fishing rights to historically disadvantaged communities as a means of addressing the significant social and economic challenges they faced (Witbooi, 2006). The Act differentiated between commercial and recreational fishers and introduced a new category of subsistence fishing in South Africa for the first time (Clark *et al*., 2002; Arnason & Kashorte, 2006). However, this definition was inadequate, as it included ambiguous elements and did not fully characterise the different sectors, such as small-scale and artisanal fishers (Minnaar, 2022). The Act also failed to distinguish between individuals who genuinely rely on these resources for food security and those who sustain their traditional livelihoods by selling fish, whose needs are different from those of industrial-scale fishers (Branch *et al*., 2002). Furthermore, it excluded individuals engaged in pre- and post-harvest fishing activities, such as cleaning, bait preparation, processing, and marketing, tasks often performed by fisherwomen (Minnaar, 2022).

In response to growing frustration among impoverished coastal communities over historical injustices experienced under apartheid, the post-apartheid government introduced a series of new fisheries and coastal zone policies. These policies aimed to empower these

communities by improving their access to coastal resources and areas (Hauck & Sowman, 2003; Sowman, 2006). However, the implementation of the MLRA primarily prioritised the industrial fishing sector. To meet the transformation requirements set by the MLRA, the industry appointed politically connected Black individuals to the boards of fishing companies and established various partnerships and joint ventures with Black businesspeople, many of whom had ties to the newly elected ANC government (Crosoer *et al.,* 2006; Ponte & van Sittert, 2007). Additionally, during the rights allocation processes of 2001-2002 and 2005-2006, over 3,000 new entrants were granted fishing rights in several quota-based fisheries, including hake longline, abalone, West Coast rock lobster, and squid (Isaacs, 2006 & 2011). While this expanded access to marine resources for some historically disadvantaged individuals, large corporations continued to dominate the fishery value chain due to their financial resources, established processing infrastructure, and strong market connections both locally and internationally. The new system largely neglected small-scale fishers, who traditionally relied on harvesting resources from the shore or small boats (Sowman, 2006; Raemaekers, 2010; Menon *et al.,* 2018).

Despite having a Constitution that promotes respect and protection of people's environmental and socio-economic rights, seeks to redress past injustices and recognises "living" customary law (section 24 of Constitution Act of 1996), the existing regime continued to marginalise small-scale fishing communities (Sunde, 2014). Power relations arising from the legacy of the apartheid continued to shape the governance of marine resources, and decisions regarding rights to access, use, and institutions for governance of marine resources remained centralised and market-based rather than people-focused (Isaacs, 2011; Sowman *et al.,* 2014). Small-scale fishing communities have raised their concerns about the post-apartheid fisheries governing system (Sowman *et al*., 2014), arguing that the past and current governance regimes failed to acknowledge their fishing practices and tenure rights. As such, the fisheries dispensation undermined their cultural and socio-economic rights and affected relations among coastal communities (Sunde, 2014).

In light of the marginalisation, a class-action suit was launched against the then Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism in 2004 (Isaacs, 2011), based on the premises that government had failed to recognise the small-scale fishing sector and failed to allocate adequate fishing rights in violation of their Constitutional rights (Sowman *et al*., 2014). The Court ruled that: "New policy and legislative process needed to be developed by all parties concerned that would include all traditional fishers in South Africa and accommodate the socio-economic rights

of these fishers." (DAFF, 2012). To address these and other disparities, the national fisheries authority initiated the development of a new small-scale fisheries policy, aimed at providing recognition of rights of small-scale fisher communities in South Africa previously marginalised and discriminated against in terms of racially exclusive laws and policies (Pederson *et al*., 2009; Raemaekers, 2010). After five long years of deliberation, the new Small-scale Fisheries policy was gazetted in June 2012 (Sowman *et al.,* 2014). In 2014, the MLRA of 1998 was amended to include the category "small-scale fisheries" and Regulations for Small-scale Fisheries were promulgated in 2016.

The new SSF policy drew on international best practice in fisheries management and governance and incorporated principles and provisions from various international documents such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing (FAO, 1996) and guidelines for the Governance of Tenure for Land, Fisheries and Forests (Seufert, 2013). In accordance with international practice, the term small-scale was adopted to provide an inclusive category that incorporated the range of fishers who fish for food and subsistence as well as those who fish on a small-scale commercial basis. The policy aimed to introduce a paradigm shift in fisheries management. It was founded on a human-rights-based approach and incorporated key aspects of the ecosystem approach to fisheries management (EAF). Recognising the need to balance the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of fisheries, the policy emphasized understanding the systemic interactions that shape these factors. This approach ensures that management interventions are carefully designed to promote both social justice and environmental sustainability.

Among the many innovative principles and provisions of this new policy, the critical role of women in the fisheries value chain was recognised, along with the need to afford them support and protection, although mechanisms for giving effect to this provision have not been fully addressed (Sowman & Sunde*,* 2021). Policies and initiatives designed to empower women across the fisheries value chain should extend beyond enhancing their post-harvest roles. Instead, they should focus on broadening support mechanisms and creating opportunities for greater involvement in fisheries governance (FAO, 2015).

2.3 Women in fisheries

2.3.1 Introduction

"Women in fisheries" is a research topic with a substantial body of literature (e.g. Harper *et al.,* 2013; FAO, 2015; Harper & Kleiber, 2016; Alonso-Población & Siar, 2018; FAO *et al*., 2023). The recently published *Illuminating Hidden Harvests* report (FAO *et al.,* 2023) included a comprehensive section about gender and fisheries. The concept of gender equality in the fisheries sector has been a topic of academic literature for more than three decades, with a significant portion of this literature emphasising the invisibility of women's roles. The gender division of labour in fishing communities is well-documented, especially highlighting the significance of women's contributions to fisheries processing, marketing and trade (Choo *et al.,* 2006; Weeratunge *et al*., 2010; Williams *et al*., 2014).

Women play a role in every facet of the fisheries value chain, from fish harvesting and processing to distribution and activism. Their contributions not only generate wealth but also aid in ocean conservation and support both household and broader fishing community needs (Gopal *et al.,* 2020). Fisherwomen are notably self-reliant resourceful and are often actively involved in economic endeavours (Harper, 2019). It's recognised that women are not just peripheral participants but key contributors in the fishing industry. Yet, despite their undeniable roles, there's limited research on small-scale fisherwomen, especially in the South African context. While women's essential roles and contributions in fisheries have gained considerable recognition globally, particularly in academic circles, they remain largely overlooked in broader society, as well as by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies. Many of these roles and activities continue to be invisible, unrecognized, and either underpaid or unpaid. As Williams *et al*. (2025) point out, the low demand for gender expertise within fisheries institutions continues to undermine progress. Compared to agriculture and climate change sectors, where gender integration is often mandatory, fisheries still lag behind in mainstreaming gender, leaving women's diverse roles across production, processing, and trade insufficiently acknowledged.

Gender inequality is a part of the greater marginalisation of small-scale fisheries around the world, particularly in developing countries (Fröcklin *et al*., 2013). Women have and continue to be overlooked and marginalised in the fishing industry and their involvement is often limited to small-scale or poorly remunerated tasks (Medard *et al.,* 2002). The general lack of attention to women's marine resource utilisation undermines their contribution to food security and

undervalues their role in sustainable marine resource management (Branch and Kleiber, 2017; Oloko *et al*., 2025). Monfort (2015) emphasizes that to ignore the role of women in fisheries is to discount their potential to strengthen the sector. Gender concerns are deeply rooted in the cultural patterns of people. Within the fishery sector, this is revealed in the many gender stereotypes (Medard *et al.,* 2002). Even though women are thought to represent 47% of the global fisheries workforce (Kelleher *et al.,*2012; FAO *et al*., 2023), their contributions are often overlooked, underestimated and/or undervalued. This is in part because, traditionally, 'fishing' is associated with going out to sea to catch fish, from a vessel, using specialized gear and done mostly by men. Also, women's work in fisheries is often unpaid, informal, part-time, or simply considered an extension of their household duties (Harper *et al.,* 2017). Furthermore, descriptive nouns such as "fishermen" are stereotyping and tend to exclude women from the sector (Medard *et al.,* 2002).

Women play a wide range of roles in fisheries worldwide, making significant contributions to the industry across different sectors from a variety of positions (FAO, 2015). Whilst the men go to sea, women, and children, repair nets, bait long-lines, gather shellfish in the intertidal zone and sometimes sell the catch. They contribute as fishers' wives, traders, operators in processing facilities, managers and administrators in fishing companies and other organisations, specifically co-operatives. Women are an important part of the workforce, making significant contributions to the industry, their families and their communities (Zhao *et al*., 2013; Frangoudes and Gerrad, 2018; D'Souza, 2020).

Frangoudes and Keromnes (2008, p.268) discovered that women performed many administrative tasks (often unpaid) to support family-based fishing enterprises in Brittany; however, such "administrative tasks are often conducted from home and often become indistinguishable from general housekeeping". The theme of women's fisheries work being perceived as an extension of their domestic function has been examined extensively in the literature. Gerrard (1995), in one of the earlier studies of women in Northern Norway fisheries, argues that women play a variety of roles in fishing households that serve as a "buffer" to the fishing households and industry – by which she means women have adapted the extent of their contributions to the seasonally and temporally contingent needs of fishing enterprises and families. In European settler communities in Newfoundland, it was common for women to work in the salt fishery – salting fish on the wharf after men hand landed their catch. Their direct contributions to the fishery were often part of the household economy and often seen as an extension of men's work and their role as wives (Gustavsson, 2020).

Spatiality is an important element of women's productive practices, since women's mobility is often portrayed as being constrained due to their responsibilities in the home. In Sierra Leone, for example, fisherwomen work close or inside the home to combine reproductive and productive work (Thorpe *et al*., 2014), while in Zanzibar, women's productive tasks in seaweed farms take place in inshore areas in proximity to, and closer to, the home, in contrast to men who use areas further from shore for their fishing activities (de la Torre-Castro *et al.,* 2017). Similar patterns of spatiality were identified in Brazilian small-scale fisheries – men engage in offshore fisheries work whist women extract shellfish from near-shore habitats or prepare shrimp for the market, enabling them to simultaneously care for their children (Santos, 2015).

Moreover, women's work is generally embedded within the setting of fishing families, and several scholars claim that even when women are paid for their work, their jobs are frequently "precarious" (Gustavsson, 2020). Harper *et al.* (2013) analysed marine fisheries catches by women from several countries of the Pacific and conservatively calculated the contribution by women to small-scale fisheries to be over 40,000t, representing 56% of total estimated small-scale fisheries catches for all countries considered. In this context, women contribute more small-scale catches than men, illustrating the significant role played by women in food security in the Pacific Islands. This fact also sharply contrasts with the traditional view that women play a relatively minor role in capture fisheries, with serious implications for fisheries management, food security policy, and development. Santos (2015) shows evidence that the same happens in Brazil, where even though women account for almost half of the registered fishers in the country, their roles are absent from policy-making decisions.

The concept that women's lives must be understood from their own perspectives is not new. In the context of fishing, Weeratunge *et al*. (2010) claim that women's own perspectives on how they value their own roles and identities in fishing are typically disregarded. While plenty of research examines men's identities (Gustavsson *et al*., 2017), relatively less research has taken an identity perspective to better understand women's lives in fishing households and beyond (Gustavsson, 2020). While women derived a sense of wellbeing from their independence in fishing families – there are plenty of examples in the literature in which fishing policies have ignored these dimensions altogether (Neis *et al.,* 2013). Gustavsson (2020) goes as far as arguing that governments often rely on women's resilience building practices without recognising them as fisherwomen/workers with the rights that this form of recognition would entail.

Recent research has also argued that women's marginalisation in fisheries cannot be understood solely through descriptive accounts of their roles but must be analysed within the broader political economy of fisheries. Williams (2019) highlights that women's invisibility is rooted in structural power relations shaped by global markets, governance, and household economies, and calls for a feminist fisheries political economy approach to more fully explain why women's contributions remain undervalued and overlooked.

A study of 33 rural programmes across 20 countries in Latin America, North America, Africa, and Asia by Westermann, Ashby, and Pretty (2005) found that women's participation in resource management enhances collaboration, solidarity, and conflict resolution. This is likely true for certain fisheries as well. For instance, in Cambodia, women have been identified as stronger advocates for transparency, inclusive participation in fishing communities, effective communication, and conflict resolution (Gätke, 2008). Ultimately, increasing women's involvement ensures that their needs and priorities are better understood and represented.

The SSF Guidelines (FAO, 2015a) are one of the first international guideline documents to recognise women's role in fisheries and to advocate for gender equity and equality. The SFF Guidelines' fourth guiding principle is gender equality and equity, and it states: "All parties should recognise that achieving gender equality requires concerted efforts by all and that gender mainstreaming should be an integral part of all small-scale fisheries development strategies" (FAO, 2015a, p.12). The inclusion of gender equity and equality in the guidelines is critical, and the thematic working group 'Women and Gender' aims to aid in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines worldwide by gathering examples of practices where gender equity and equality in SSF from around the world are enabled and barriers, challenges, and opportunities are highlighted.

2.3.2 Women in Fisheries in Africa

Africa has achieved great attention in terms of the contribution of SSFs to poverty alleviation and food security (Kébé, 2009). In addition to the value of the primary fishing industry, processing and marketing activities add considerable value to a community and the country but have been previously underrated (FAO, 2005). Concerning gender and fisheries, researchers have begun examining women's contribution to African fisheries. Research suggests that the fishing industry in Africa provides income-creating opportunities for women, considered among the most ostracized social groups in developing nations (Williams, 2001). For instance, about 90% of fish sellers are women in the Congo (Kébé, 2009). In Mozambique, women's participation in fishing

activities has significantly been incorporated into the culture to supplement family incomes (March and Failler, 2022). Also, since many men from Mozambique were progressively engaged in the South African mining sector, this meant that women had fewer barriers to entering fisheries (March and Failler, 2022). In the Comoros coastal populations, women have been part of fishing for a long time, especially harvesting fish during the low tide. Here, women in fisheries usually sell much of their catch while keeping enough for household consumption, contributing to family income and food security (Harper *et al*., 2013). Women have been actively involved in catching, processing, and marketing fish in West African fisheries (Marquette *et al*., 2002). The increased global demand for fresh fish has led to the evolution of women's role in fisheries. Fish are increasingly sold sea-fresh to vendors providing European markets or transported straight to ships intended for Europe (Harper *et al.,* 2013). Women working in West African markets provide financial credit to fishers and maintain a clear client–benefactor relationship (March and Failler, 2022). While West African women rarely catch fish, they participate in fish distribution, which supplements family income, and supply provisions like ice, bait, and salt, as well as repair fishing equipment (March and Failler, 2022). In Sierra Leone, for example, even though women dominate post-harvesting and retailing, they are paid far less than men (Thorpe *et al*., 2014).

In East Africa, women garner fish from Mozambique's intertidal region (Wosu, 2018). In Tanzania, they are involved in seaweed cultivation, octopus catching, and harvesting small fish around intertidal areas (Porter *et al*., 2008). However, with the demand for octopus growing across the globe, women are progressively being ousted by men from this business, which has been a critical source of food and income (FAO, 2013).

2.3.3 Women in fisheries in South Africa

In South Africa, fisheries have historically been characterised by a sharp division of labour, with women involved in pre- and post-harvest activities while men go out to sea or fish. Nowadays, both men and women in South Africa are involved in various direct and indirect fishing activities, although data regarding participation in these activities are very limited (Harper *et al.,* 2017). The lack of gender-disaggregated data available makes it difficult to accurately reflect the reality and the real position of women working in the various segments of the fishing industry. Such existing data do not reflect their role and responsibilities, their access and control over resources, assets, credits, information, training and technology, nor the power they have (or do not have), their decision-making, and nor their access to leadership (Sunde, 2010; FAO, 2020; Masifundise, 2023).

South Africa has made some progress in the inclusion of gender equity measures in fisheries policy, starting with the introduction of the MLRA (1998) which aimed to provide more equitable fisheries access and benefits – although for many small-scale fishers the result was further exclusion and disempowerment (Harper *et al.,* 2017). Policy changes that followed, however, failed to address gender disparities (Sunde and Raemaekers, 2010). In 2012, after a decade in the making, a small-scale fisheries policy was adopted, which included a specific section on gender, marking an important step towards gender mainstreaming in the fisheries sector (DAFF, 2012). One of the policy's main objectives is "to promote equitable (race, gender, disability) access to and benefits from, marine living resources, taking the historical background of the fisher/s into account;" (DAFF, 2012, p.25) by promoting "the economic empowerment of women within the small scale fisheries sector" and changing "practices that previously hindered women's access to, and benefit from, resources, employment, economic opportunities and decision-making." (DAFF, 2012, p.29).

South Africa's small-scale fisheries sector is relatively small compared to other developing countries, and is estimated to be less than a 100,000, including those involved in pre- and post-harvest activities (Menon *et al.,* 2018). Women's fishing activity in South Africa is highly characterised by gleaning in near-shore and intertidal zones either for household consumption or to be sold (FAO, 2015; Fonto, 2021). There is no recent national data on the number of women engaged in the fisheries sector although a national survey conducted in 2000 suggested that about one-third of small-scale fishers in rural areas are women (Branch *et al.,* 2002). However, there are a few case studies that have been undertaken in local coastal communities that provide some data and insights into the range of activities women are engaged in and the importance of fisheries as a source of food, as a contribution to food and household income (Sunde and Erwin, 2020; Cele, 2020). While men harvest higher-value species and have access to larger areas, boats and sophisticated gear, women in rural areas often focus on harvesting for mussels, limpets, winkles, and oysters in the intertidal zone, activities that are traditionally classified under gathering and food provision rather than fishing, reinforcing their role as secondary to men (Branch *et al*., 2002; Cele, 2020).

In KwaZulu-Natal, research has shown that women play a critical role in the small-scale fisheries sector, particularly in shore-based resource harvesting. Women harvest intertidal resources such as mussels and oysters, both for household consumption and for informal markets. However, they often experience structural discrimination that limits their ability to fully participate

and benefit from marine resource harvesting, restricting their economic opportunities and reinforcing their marginalisation within the fisheries sector (Cele, 2020; Sunde and Erwin, 2020).

Recognising women's roles throughout the entire fisheries value chain and integrating their contributions into formal fisheries management is essential to addressing gender inequities in small-scale fisheries. Gender-responsive policies are crucial to secure women's access to marine resources, support their inclusion in fisheries governance, and ensure their economic participation in the sector.

2.3.4 Small Scale Fisheries Value Chain

As previously mentioned, the SSF sector is a critical component of global food security and livelihoods, particularly in coastal and rural areas. Employing millions of people worldwide, SSF supports communities through the provision of food, income, and cultural identity (Béné *et al.,* 2007). The pathway from catch to consumer is facilitated by a number of interconnected steps that make up the small-scale fisheries (SSF) value chain (Figure 2). It's critical to comprehend these phases in order to identify opportunities to boost financial gains, advance sustainability, and raise the standard of living for those who rely on SSF (FAO, 2015a).

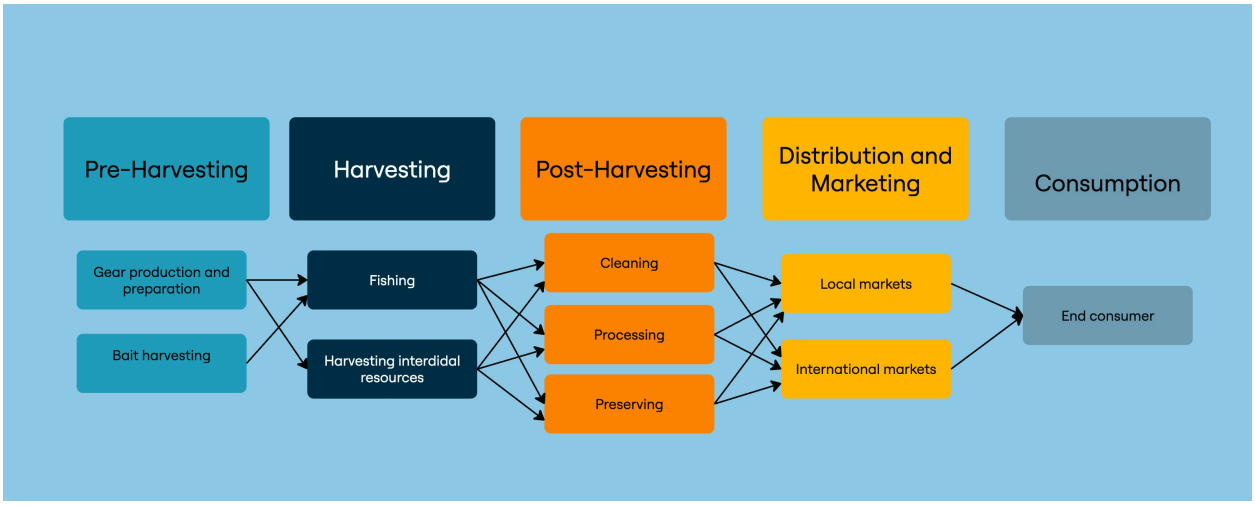

Figure 2. Simple diagram illustrating the stages of the SSF value chain

Pre-harvesting is the first step in the process, which includes tasks like making gear, and harvesting bait. Using materials that are readily available in the area, fishers construct and maintain fishing gear such as nets, lines, and traps. Harvesting procedures cannot be successful without these preparations (Jacinto and Pomeroy, 2011; FAO, 2015a). The next step is harvesting, which includes actually catching or gathering fish and other intertidal resources. Depending on the target

species and local environmental conditions, fishers use a variety of techniques and equipment, including handlines, spears, nets, and traps. The act of sorting, cleaning, processing, and preserving the catch to preserve its quality and prolong its shelf life is known as post-harvesting. Salting, smoking, drying, and fermenting are common processing methods that are frequently influenced by resource availability and cultural customs. To reduce losses and guarantee food safety and quality, proper post-harvest treatment is essential (FAO *et al.,* 2023).

Distribution and marketing occur after harvesting is complete. Products made from processed fish are shipped to different markets and sold to customers. Local markets as well as regional and global commerce networks are examples of distribution routes. Good marketing techniques, like product branding and labelling, help fishers get fair pricing and improve their access to markets (Jacinto and Pomeroy, 2011; FAO, 2015a). Consumption is the last phase of the value chain, during which time end customers acquire fish goods. Fishing practices are greatly influenced by consumer demand and tastes, which affect the kinds of fish that are gathered as well as the processing and preparation techniques (FAO, 2015a).

Every step in the SSF value chain is interrelated, with choices and actions made at one point affecting results at subsequent stages. Stakeholders can pinpoint problem areas, carry out focused interventions, and strive toward a more sustainable and just SSF sector by having a thorough awareness of these stages (FAO, 2015a). From pre-harvest tasks like preparing equipment and bait to actual harvesting, post-harvest processing, and marketing, women have a variety of roles across the SSF value chain.

The gendered dimensions of the SSF value chain highlight the diverse yet undervalued roles that women play (Choo *et al.,* 2006; Weeratunge *et al*., 2010; FAO, 2015). While men are typically more visible in harvesting activities, women dominate post-harvest and processing stages, ensuring that fish and seafood products reach markets and consumers (Béné *et al*., 2016). Women often engage in informal trading networks, which are essential for the distribution of SSF products in local economies. However, these activities are frequently unpaid or underpaid, reflecting systemic undervaluation of women's labour in the fisheries sector (Jacquet *et al*., 2010). Moreover, their contributions are rarely acknowledged in policy frameworks, reinforcing their exclusion from decision-making processes at community and institutional levels (Sowman *et al.,* 2014; Hara and Njaya, 2016).

Throughout the SSF value chain, gender disparities still exist despite women's crucial roles, restricting their access to economic opportunities, decision-making platforms, and resources.

These differences hinder the sector's capacity for fair and sustainable growth in addition to undermining the contributions of women (Sowman & Cardoso, 2010; Kleiber *et al.,* 2015; Mahmud *et al*., 2025). Women's access to vital resources like loans, training, and decision-making platforms is restricted by their lack of official recognition, which hinders their capacity to fully engage in and profit from the industry (Harper *et al.,* 2017).

There are further sustainability ramifications when women are excluded from fair participation in the SSF value chain. Empowering women has been shown to result in more sustainable resource management techniques (Luna, 2014; Calhoun *et al.,* 2016; de la Torre-Castro, 2019). Women are important contributors to social and ecological resilience because they frequently put the welfare of the home and community first (Harper *et al.,* 2013). However, this potential is not fully realized by gender-blind methods to fisheries management, which compromises sustainability and gender equity objectives.

Addressing gender inequalities in the small-scale fisheries value chain is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for the sector's sustainability and resilience. By recognising and valuing women's contributions, and by dismantling systemic barriers, policymakers and stakeholders can unlock the full potential of SSF for equitable development. A gender-inclusive approach to fisheries governance, supported by research and advocacy, is critical to achieving these objectives and fostering a more just and sustainable future for small-scale fisheries (Béné *et al.*, 2007; Kleiber *et al*., 2015; Tsele, 2015; Mahmud *et al.*, 2025).

2.3.5 Factors hindering women's full participation in the SSFs sector

Despite women's significant involvement in the fisheries value chain, structural and systemic barriers continue to hinder their full participation. Gender disparities in access to resources, decision-making power, and economic opportunities persist due to deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms and institutional biases. For instance, women often struggle to access critical resources such as credit, fishing rights, and technology, which are necessary for improving their productivity and market reach (Tsele, 2015; Mahmud *et al.*, 2025). Patriarchal customs and laws often prevent them from owning property such as boats and fishing equipment, hence limiting their access to expensive fishing trips. Gender-blind fisheries policies that disregard the special demands and limitations of women aggravate these issues. Such exclusions restrict women's access to economic growth prospects and their capacity to engage in meaningful sector participation, as noted by Kleiber *et al.* (2015).

Due to a lack of data in national statistics, their labour, such as their gleaning or near-shore fishing, is largely invisible (Zhao *et al*., 2013; FAO, 2022). Furthermore, because of social norms and domestic responsibilities, women are rarely involved in commercial offshore and long-distance capture fishing and are mostly excluded from accessing profitable markets. Instead, they are, as mentioned above, involved in invertebrate collection, near-shore fishing, as well as in pre- and post-harvesting activities, all of which are less profitable. Despite their role in the pre- and post-harvest sector, they seldom hold well-paid posts in the processing factories (FAO, 2022).

For women in SSF, workplace disparities are a major problem in addition to resource availability. Many women, especially those employed in post-harvest positions, face unfavourable working conditions that include low pay, long hours, and minimal social protection. They have few legal options and are exposed to exploitation and abuse due to informal employment arrangements (Harper *et al*., 2013). Their vulnerabilities are further increased by gender-based violence and harassment, especially in areas where men predominate, such as markets and fish landing sites (Kleiber *et al*., 2015). These structural obstacles hinder the sector's capacity to attain equitable development in addition to limiting women's economic empowerment.

Exclusion from decision-making processes further marginalises women, as they are often underrepresented in governance structures, unions, and fisheries cooperatives. In addition to maintaining gender inequality, this underrepresentation deprives the industry of the range of viewpoints required for inclusive and sustainable development (FAO, 2014; Harper *et al*., 2017; Kleiber *et al*., 2017).

Despite these factors, women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, often mobilising community networks and collective actions to address shared challenges (Hara and Njaya, 2016). Organisations and cooperatives led by women have emerged as powerful platforms for advocating gender equity, improving livelihoods, and ensuring sustainable resource management (Sowman *et al.,* 2014). Women's leadership in fisheries cooperatives has been instrumental in promoting sustainable fishing practices and marine conservation in Mexico. According to a study conducted in 2019, in places like Ligüí, Isla Natividad, Isla Magdalena, and Isla Guadalupe, women have taken on leadership roles in fisheries management, including the establishment of marine protected areas, resource monitoring programs, and environmental restoration projects (Torre *et al.,* 2019).

Gender-sensitive policies and capacity-building initiatives are increasingly recognized as essential for empowering women and addressing inequities in SSF (Kleiber *et al.,* 2015). For

instance, integrating gender considerations into fisheries management frameworks can help ensure equitable access to resources and participation in decision-making processes (Isaacs, 2013; Hara and Njaya, 2016). In Madagascar, locally managed marine areas have seen a rapid expansion over the past decade as part of community-based conservation efforts. Women have historically been underrepresented in these governance structures however, the creation of a Fisherwomen Leadership Program (FWLP) increased the participation of women in fisheries management and decision-making by establishing a national platform for fisherwomen leaders. The program brought together women from different regions, providing them with leadership training, networking opportunities, and a collective voice to advocate for gender equity in marine governance (Baker-Médard *et al.,* 2023).

2.3.6 Pathways to enhancing gender equity in fisheries

Enhancing the contributions of small-scale fisheries (SSFs) to sustainable development requires careful consideration of gender issues. According to FAO *et al.* (2023), at least 44.7 million women work in small-scale fishing globally, yet their contributions are still undervalued. Systemic obstacles that women in the field frequently encounter include exclusion from decision-making, restricted access to resources, and economic marginalisation. Even though they actively participate in fisheries-related activities, their roles are frequently limited to informal and unpaid labour, which limits their access to financial and social support. The nutritional and livelihood benefits that fisheries offer are also less accessible to women, which exacerbates gender disparities in the sector (FAO *et al*., 2023). In line with this evidence, practical priorities include gender-disaggregated data, participatory governance that elevates women's decision-making roles, targeted capacity-building and social protection for informal workers, and stronger action against IUU fishing to reduce gendered vulnerability (Oloko *et al.,* 2025).

Gender inequity in fisheries, especially in parts of Africa and Asia, results from inadequate gender-specific data in fishing and the under-representation of SSF in fisheries catch statistics (Pauly, 2006; Harper *et al.,* 2013). Traditional perceptions of fishing predominantly define it as the act of capturing fish using specialised gear from fishing vessels. Because of this, other types of harvesting—like that of intertidal resources—have been excluded from recognition as acceptable fishing practices. Rather than being classified as fishing, these activities are frequently classified as gathering and food provisioning. As a result, the vital role that women play in

harvesting intertidal resources is still underappreciated in the fisheries industry, even though it significantly improves local lives and food security (Harper *et al.,* 2013).

The absence of gender-disaggregated data reinforces gender-blind policies and perpetuates the invisibility of women's contributions to SSF (FAO *et al.,* 2023). Women's participation in fisheries-related activities, particularly in post-harvest processing and subsistence fishing, is often underestimated. To address these disparities, institutional changes are necessary. The SSF Guidelines (2015) advocate for systematic data collection strategies that capture the diverse roles of women in fisheries, which would provide a more accurate understanding of women's roles and contributions in SSFs, facilitating the development of inclusive policies and programs. Recognising subsistence, informal, and unpaid work in fisheries is also essential, as this would enable a more comprehensive characterisation of the sector and highlight the significance of women's contributions. Furthermore, ensuring gender-equitable access to fisheries is crucial for food security and economic empowerment. Without equitable access to resources, markets, and decision-making platforms, women remain disadvantaged and unable to fully benefit from their participation in the sector (FAO, 2015a; FAO *et al.,* 2023).

Beyond data collection, women's representation in fisheries governance and decision-making remains limited. Women are excluded from important regulatory and policy choices in many coastal and inland fishing communities due to the male-dominated nature of fisheries management institutions (FAO *et al.,* 2023). By giving them leadership training and structured positions in management councils, policy advisory boards, and fisheries cooperatives, the SSF Guidelines highlight the importance of empowering women. Since women typically place a higher priority on long-term resource management and community well-being, increasing their participation in governance institutions not only advances gender parity but also improves sustainability (FAO, 2015a; Williams *et al.,* 2025).

The transformation of gender norms is another vital step in promoting women's leadership and governance in small-scale fisheries. Historically, women have been underrepresented in fisheries management and policymaking, which has led to their exclusion from key decisions that affect their livelihoods. Strengthening legal frameworks and implementing enforceable policies aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5—which focuses on gender equality—is fundamental to addressing these issues. The suggested reforms in the fisheries sector are closely aligned with specific SDG targets, such as Target 5.1 (eliminating discrimination against women and girls), Target 5.5 (ensuring full and effective participation of women in

leadership and decision-making), and Target 5.c (adopting and strengthening gender-equitable policies and legislation) (FAO *et al.,* 2023).

The SSF Guidelines advocate for a human rights-based approach, emphasising the need for gender equality and social inclusion as fundamental principles in fisheries governance and development (FAO, 2015a), in the form of gender-responsive policies that recognise women's contributions to fisheries, and ensure that they have legal access to fishing rights, training programs, and financial assistance. Tanzania and Cambodia are two examples of nations that have successfully increased women's access to resources and decision-making authority by enacting gender-inclusive legal frameworks (FAO, 2015a). By formalising women's rights and their participation in fisheries management structures, the expansion of such frameworks around the world would promote gender equity.

In South Africa, small-scale fishers have gained prominence in recent years because of their lobbying efforts, demanding that a human rights-based approach to fisheries include an emphasis on their rights as women (Raemaekers and Sunde, 2015). The importance and contribution of women's knowledge in the fishery sector and their dual role in production and reproduction (as main caregivers of children and the elderly) points to the need to effectively identify gender roles in the sector (Medard *et al.,* 2002) and bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and fishers' knowledge (Neis, 2000).

Achieving long-term equity requires more than just legal and economic changes; it also requires a shift in how society views gender roles in fishing. Women are frequently marginalised in fisheries due to traditional conventions that categorize their efforts as "gathering" rather than "fishing" (Harper *et al.,* 2013). Their contributions are undercut by this conceptual prejudice, which also keeps them out of decisions and resource allocation pertaining to fisheries.

Campaigns for advocacy and education can be quite effective in changing these attitudes. Stereotypes can be challenged and changed by including gender-sensitive training into fisheries extension programs, involving men in gender discussions, and showcasing successful examples of women in leadership roles in the fishing industry (FAO *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, recognising the unpaid labour of women in fisheries-related household activities contributes to a more equitable understanding of their roles in sustaining fishing communities.

The role of women in SSF and their important contribution to the SSFs sector and its management has been reviewed by several researchers, as discussed above. However, there is limited information about the roles and contributions of women in the SSF sector in South Africa,

as well as information on the challenges they face, main factors impeding their recognition in the sector and possible pathways to greater participation and equity in the sector. A road map for incorporating gender equity into fisheries policies and practices can be found in the SSF Guidelines (FAO, 2015a) and the Illuminating Hidden Harvests study (FAO *et al.,* 2023). By guaranteeing that all members of fishing communities can fairly participate in and profit from fisheries resources, achieving gender equity benefits women as well as small-scale fisheries' sustainability and resilience.

In order to better understand the role and contributions of women in the SSFs sector, and the factors and challenges affecting their recognition and full participation in the sector, this study will draw on the opinions and knowledge of local fisherwomen in St. Helena Bay. These findings will then be considered in the light of the various international frameworks (SDGs), policies and SSFs Guidelines (2015) that propose pathways for enhancing gender equity in SSFs and possible pathways for enhancing greater gender equity in the SSFs sector in South Africa will be put forward.

3. Methodology: Navigating the Research

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted the need for more in-depth and nuanced research in the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector, particularly from a women's perspective. Such research is necessary to uncover and bridge existing knowledge gaps concerning women's roles and responsibilities throughout the entire SSF value chain.

In order to enhance equity in the fisheries sector, it is critical to improve understanding of the diverse and significant roles that women play, extending beyond post-harvest processing and marketing. By focusing research efforts on the multifaceted contributions of women, this study aims to guide the development of more effective and inclusive policies, ensuring that women's contributions are acknowledged and supported. Furthermore, such research may help challenge conventional gender norms and promote more sustainable and equitable management practices.

Research on women's roles in South Africa's small-scale fishing industry is crucial, as the literature assessment in the preceding chapter made clear. The approach and techniques used to collect thorough data on the roles and experiences of women in St. Helena Bay's small-scale fishing community—a community that depends on fishing for food, livelihoods, and a way of life—are described in this methodology chapter. Fishing is infused with material, cultural, and historical significance.

This chapter discusses the phases through which fieldwork was undertaken at the research site. The research adopted a case study approach and employed semi-structured interviews with fisherwomen in the three fishing communities in St Helena Bay: Steenberg's Cove, Stompneus Bay and Laingville (see Figures 3, 4 and 5 in the next Chapter 4). A thorough analysis of published and grey literature pertaining to fisheries in the St. Helena Bay region was conducted in addition to the interviews. By considering both empirical data and current knowledge, this mixed-method approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex roles that women play in SSFs. To offer a more comprehensive framework for comprehending gender roles and the difficulties faced by women fishermen in small-scale fisheries generally, the study also consults pertinent literature from other fishing communities and industries (Bennett, 2005).

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Case Study Approach

A case study approach was adopted to enable a deep investigation into a specific SSF community and understand the intricate dynamics of women's roles within the value chain and their contribution to the fishery. A case study approach is a comprehensive research strategy that involves an empirical investigation of a particular phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). This method acknowledges the interrelated social, economic, and environmental elements that shape people's reality and encourages a greater connection with their lived experiences. Relationships, common understandings, and ongoing discussion propel the process, allowing for critical reflection and producing significant case insights. A case study can reveal intricacies, difficulties, and opportunities that could otherwise go unnoticed by combining several points of view (Simons, 2015).

A case study approach enables researchers to gain a thorough understanding of how small-scale fishery participants view and engage with their surroundings and one another. This approach places a strong emphasis on the value of establishing rapport and fostering collaborative efforts among participants. The participants co-created their perceived realities through their shared experiences as women in St. Helena Bay's fisheries, which the study seeks to document and examine. Researchers can consider and acquire deep insights into how fisherwomen in SSF communities view their "place" in the industry, including the subtleties and complexity of their interactions, by concentrating on these dynamics (Villasante *et al*., 2022). To fully comprehend the situation and enable a more nuanced interpretation of the gathered evidence, this reflecting process is essential.

Engaging with and examining the roles of fisherwomen within both their immediate and broader contexts, including their homes and workplaces, provided a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities, challenges, and overall circumstances, along with those of their families.

Knowledge is shaped by experience and influenced by values, morals, and political perspectives, meaning that individuals actively construct and define knowledge as they interpret their interactions with the world (Nadasdy, 1999). To fully grasp the current conditions and lived realities of fisherwomen, it is essential to consider their histories, evolving contexts, and the factors influencing their daily lives, along with their concerns, rather than merely analysing their actions, which are often reactions to external challenges (e.g., being denied fishing rights without

explanation from the government). This approach prioritizes understanding how fisherwomen interpret their experiences, make sense of their daily realities, and assign meaning to them.

Because they are shaped by their environment, time, and other people's perspectives, fisherwomen's and their communities' experiences are intrinsically linked to a particular historical, social, and material context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Therefore, the constructed character of the world, politics, values, and interests of the participants as well as those in the larger SSF sector were all covered in this study.

While the case study method offers significant advantages—such as contextual depth, the ability to incorporate multiple data sources, and sensitivity to lived experience—it is not without its limitations. One of the main challenges lies in the issue of generalisability. Because the findings are derived from a single geographical and social context, they may not be representative of broader populations or applicable to other SSF communities across South Africa. Furthermore, the quality and depth of insight gained are closely tied to the researcher's ability to build trust and rapport with participants—something that can be difficult to achieve within limited fieldwork timeframes (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Case studies are also time-consuming, both in terms of data collection and analysis, and can be prone to researcher bias due to their interpretive nature. Despite these limitations, the case study approach remains valuable for this research due to its capacity to illuminate the nuanced realities of fisherwomen's roles and identities—insights that would be difficult to obtain through household surveys or purely quantitative methods.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Literature Review and Analysis

In addition to a review of relevant published literature, a comprehensive review of grey literature sources was conducted to establish a baseline of knowledge about women's roles in SSFs in South Africa. Grey literature reviewed includes various technical reports, a legal case (Adams and Others vs Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy and Others, 2022) which involved fishers (both men and women) from the study site, government documents, theses, and academic articles not formally published in peer-reviewed journals. This stage was essential for synthesizing previous findings and identifying knowledge gaps, which guided some of the semi-structured interview questions. Additionally, it gave me access to data and perspectives that are rarely found in traditional, peer-reviewed research.

A more comprehensive knowledge of the role of fisherwomen in the small-scale fisheries sector generally, and in St Helena Bay particularly, was made possible by the inclusion of grey literature in this qualitative study.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

To complement the literature review, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with fisherwomen from the communities of Steenberg's Cove, Laingville and Stompneus Bay were conducted between 2022-2024. Table 1 below shows show the demographic distribution of the research respondents by community and age (at the time of the interview).

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents by Community and Age

Respondent #	Community	Age
1	Laingville	56
2	Laingville	67
3	Steenberg's Cove	58
4	Laingville	53
5	Steenberg's Cove	62
6	Steenberg's Cove	64
7	Steenberg's Cove	53
8	Laingville	62
9	Steenberg's Cove	35
10	Laingville	59
11	Steenberg's Cove	53
12	Steenberg's Cove	63
13	Steenberg's Cove	40
14	Steenberg's Cove	52
15	Stompneus Bay	59
16	Stompneus Bay	62
17	Stompneus Bay	55

As shown in the table, most of the women interviewed were over the age of 50, with only two respondents under that age. This age distribution reflects the demographic reality of the fishing communities in St Helena Bay, where older women have historically shouldered much of the responsibility in both formal and informal fisheries work. It also highlights the generational nature of fishing knowledge and the fact that many younger women are either not yet recognised as small-scale fishers or are increasingly pursuing alternative livelihoods outside the sector due to its precarious nature.

This study began just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring fieldwork plans to be postponed for an extended period. Timelines for data collecting and research methods were severely disrupted by the unanticipated delays brought on by lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health concerns. Other strategies, like interviewing people over the phone, were considered but eventually rejected. Since non-verbal clues like body language and facial expressions are essential for obtaining deeper insights throughout the interview process, this approach was judged insufficient. Fieldwork therefore only took place from 2022.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were selected over household surveys due to the desire to gain in-depth knowledge about the respondents' involvement in the fishery, their roles and responsibilities and the need to build relationships of trust during the research process. In many cases, participants had limited access to mobile data, internet connectivity, or digital devices, making online or remote survey methods impractical and potentially exclusionary. More importantly, building trust was essential when engaging with participants about their personal histories, livelihoods, and challenges in a historically marginalised sector. The personal nature of in-person interviews allowed for a stronger relational dynamic and gave participants space to speak openly, while the researcher could respond empathetically to their body language and tone. This helped foster a more authentic exchange and reduced the risk of misinterpretation or surface-level responses. In this context, the semi-structured format provided a necessary balance between consistency and flexibility, ensuring that each interview could adapt to the comfort level and storytelling style of the participant while still covering key themes.

Most interview questions were open ended to encourage women to explore the issue in greater depth. Fisherwomen were given the space to speak about issues of concern to them and could direct the discussion to issues of interest to them. Some would simply answer the questions, while others would explore the topic further, and often the interview would take a completely

different direction. However, the interview schedule was useful in redirecting the discussion to the questions being asked.

The interview guide was designed to explore a range of topics, including:

- Women's participation in SSFs activities (including a brief family history).
- The division of labour in the value chain.
- Barriers and challenges faced by women in SSFs.
- The impact of cultural norms and social structures on women's participation in the fishery.
- Policy and institutional support for women in SSFs.
- Sustainability and environmental considerations.

A total of 17 fisherwomen from St Helena Bay were interviewed, including 5 from Laingville, 9 from Steenberg's Cove and 3 from Stompneus Bay. Since my supervisor and other researchers in the department where I am based had undertaken research in St Helena Bay previously, I reached out to known contacts in the area to identify women who were willing to be interviewed. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, targeting women who were known—based on prior research and engagement. The only requirement was that the interviewee had some involvement in the fishing sector, whether through harvesting, processing, selling, or other support roles.

I initially set out to interview between 15 and 20 women across the three communities, aiming for a sample that was both diverse and manageable within the available time and logistical constraints. After conducting 17 interviews, I found that data saturation had been reached, as no new themes or significantly different insights were emerging from subsequent interviews. As such, it was deemed methodologically appropriate to conclude the interview phase at this point, since further interviews were unlikely to add meaningful new information.

The interviews with the fisherwomen from Laingville took place in the local sports hall during a single visit. The interviews with the fisherwomen from Steenberg's Cove were conducted at both the local hotel and hall over two separate visits. Interviews with the fisherwomen from Stompneus Bay were held at a restaurant by the harbour during a single visit. On average, each interview lasted 30-40 minutes, however, some participants were quite shy resulting in shorter discussions while others provided expansive responses to my questions. All interviews took place one-on-one, with only myself, the participant, and an interpreter present; they were audio-recorded

following participants' consent. An interpreter was present to assist during the interviews, which were mostly held in Afrikaans, the local language.

Afterwards, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. When including interviews in Afrikaans in this research, I was mindful of the potential distortions that may occur when translating from another language into English, thus leading to possible misrepresentation of the original content. During the analysis process, certain translated interviews didn't seem to align with my recollection of what was said, or some sections appeared nonsensical. In such instances, I sought assistance from Google Translate and colleagues fluent in Afrikaans to ensure accuracy.

As often happens when you don't speak the language of your subjects, after reading the translated script of the interviews, I identified some missing gaps and missed opportunities for follow-up questions. Therefore, follow-up interviews were scheduled and conducted with two of participants to clarify answers provided and expand on certain topics.

3.4 Data Analysis

Integrating data from interview transcripts and grey literature was essential to the research technique. The procedure comprised a thorough content analysis of the collected data with the goal of identifying significant themes and insights. Initially, all interview transcripts were read and re-read to become deeply familiar with the content. A preliminary round of open coding was conducted by hand, during which recurring concepts, expressions, and keywords were highlighted. These were then grouped into thematic categories such as "roles in the value chain," "barriers to participation," "policy perceptions," and "intergenerational knowledge transfer."

To manage and organise the coded data, a study matrix in the form of a pivot table was developed using Excel. Each row represented a respondent, while each column reflected a key theme or sub-theme. Quotations from the interviews and descriptive observations were placed within the appropriate cells, allowing for systematic comparison across participants and communities. This matrix made it possible to identify both recurring themes and outlier responses, providing a visual and analytical tool for tracking how particular ideas emerged across the dataset.

The selected interpretative technique permitted a detailed examination of the rich and context-dependent nature of the collected data, in contrast to quantitative analysis, which mainly looks for statistical connections between variables. This approach stressed the importance of understanding the data within its specific social and historical context. In addition to identifying

patterns, the qualitative content analysis also sought to interpret the meanings embedded in participants' narratives, offering in-depth insights into the complex and diverse conditions being studied (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

The incorporation of data triangulation, which entails collecting data from several sources or utilising various methodologies within the same study, significantly improves the efficacy of content analysis in qualitative research. By reducing the biases present in single-method studies and enabling cross-verification of results, this method improves the analysis's depth and credibility (Patton, 1999). For instance, combining data with insights from grey literature enhances knowledge of the topic and offers a strong foundation for an in-depth examination. This thesis specifically relied on data triangulation by integrating findings from recent academic and grey literature, semi-structured interviews, and—where possible—participant observation during field visits. While the scope for prolonged participant observation was limited, informal engagement with participants and witnessing their activities within community spaces enriched the contextual understanding of the data. By providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon, this methodological triangulation aids in the development of well-founded findings that consider the intricacies and dynamism of real-world situations.

By carefully examining the data, researchers can find nuances and subtleties that could otherwise go unnoticed in more cursory study. By doing this, qualitative content analysis guarantees a comprehensive investigation of the contextual relevance of the data, allowing for a rich interpretation that closely relates to the research's theoretical foundations. Drawing significant conclusions that can guide theory, practice, and future research paths requires a meticulous, interpretive approach (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to key ethical principles, including obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' anonymity. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Science at the University of Cape Town (UCT) prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation, including the right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, and all identifying information was removed, with participants assigned numerical identifiers in the research outputs.

Access to the St Helena Bay community was facilitated by longstanding relationships between local fishers and UCT researchers, which helped establish trust. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, fieldwork originally scheduled for 2020 was postponed until 2022, when in-person interviews were deemed safe. This delay was particularly important as many of the women interviewed were elderly or had underlying health conditions. While remote interviews were considered, it was ultimately decided to wait for in-person engagement, as participants' demeanour and reactions were a valuable source of qualitative data.

3.6 Limitations

Although every attempt was taken to guarantee that the study was academically robust and methodologically sound, it is important to recognize some limitations. These restrictions included travel restrictions, limited direct participant participation, and major fieldwork delays brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupted scheduled study operations. In-person interviews were not possible due to social distancing tactics and lockdowns. Overcoming language hurdles during interviews and understanding the dynamic nature of the SSF sector—which was going through major structural and policy changes during the research period—were additional challenges.

A language barrier existed as most fisherwomen primarily spoke Afrikaans and felt most comfortable communicating in their native language, although many had some understanding of and ability to speak English. To make the participants as comfortable as possible during the interview process, a translator was always present so that the fisherwomen had the option of answering in Afrikaans, and questions they didn't understand could be translated into Afrikaans.

However, this meant that I did not always fully understand some of the answers during the interviews and certain comments or meanings of facial expressions might have been missed even though the translator provided a summary of all the Afrikaans responses during the interviews. Afterwards, the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated by an Afrikaans first language speaker. Due to my limited understanding of Afrikaans, I was not always able to suggest follow up questions during the interviews, which became evident as I reviewed the transcripts and translated responses, therefore requiring follow up interviews.

Another limitation relates to the use of a case study approach to draw general conclusions. While case studies are highly flexible and can be adapted to suit the unique context of the research, one major concern is their generalizability, as findings from a single case may not be applicable to broader contexts. While this research focuses on a single case study – St Helena Bay – it drew on the insights of women from three communities within the St Helena Bay region as well as broader regional and national insights from the grey literature to contextualize the findings. Therefore, I believe that the findings of this study can contribute to a wider understanding of gender dynamics in South Africa's small-scale fisheries sector and contribute to pathways to enhancing gender equity in fisheries.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methodology used to investigate the roles, contributions and challenges of women in the SSFs value chain. A case study approach was adopted and employed semi-structured interviews with fisherwomen from three communities within the study area. Information derived from these interviews was complemented by a comprehensive review of grey literature, providing a rich data set for analysing the complex and multifaceted nature of fisherwomen's participation in SSFs in St Helena Bay. The next chapter will provide an overview of the St Helena Bay's fishing industry, including an historical perspective of the sector and the history and development of the SSF sector.

4. An Overview of St Helena Bay Fisheries

4.1 Early days

Located on the west coast of South Africa, about 150 km northwest of Cape Town, lies the town of St Helena Bay. This serene and picturesque bay boasts rich fishing grounds, which have sustained commercial and small-scale fisheries for centuries (Minnaar, 2022). This first section of the chapter explores the history of fisheries in St Helena Bay, emphasizing the unique challenges small-scale fishers, specifically fisherwomen, have faced throughout the sector's development. The history of St Helena is a tale of resilience, as its fishing communities have weathered the challenges of the sea, colonisation, apartheid, economic shifts, and climate change. The chapter then provides an overview of the current state of the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector in St Helena Bay, drawing on insights from a recent household survey conducted among SSF participants in the study area.

St Helena Bay's fishing history is deeply intertwined with the socio-economic development of the region. Subsistence fishing was initially practiced by the native Khoisan, who used age-old methods that supported their community without significantly impacting marine ecosystems (Mather, 2007). These communities used a variety of fishing techniques, such as spearfishing, handline fishing, and the construction of nets and traps (van Sittert, 1993). Fishing was not only a means of subsistence but also played a crucial role in the cultural and social life of these communities.

Commercial exploitation began with the advent of European settlers in the 17th century, permanently changing the fishing environment of St. Helena Bay (van Sittert, 2002). In St Helena Bay, fishing has a long history dating back to at least the early 1900s. The bay has been a significant fishing area for various species, including hake and other demersal fish. The settlers engaged in both subsistence and commercial fishing, harvesting a variety of fish species like snoek and anchovies that were abundant in the region (Mubaiwa, 2014).

The development of St Helena Bay, spearheaded by European settlers, involved the dispossession of indigenous and local communities from their land, particularly along coastal areas. This process of land acquisition and economic development by the settlers led to a restructuring of traditional land use patterns. As the fishing industry expanded, the displacement of indigenous communities from their coastal lands became a significant aspect of the town's historical development (van Sittert, 1992; Schultz, 2010).

The introduction of European fishing practices also had a significant effect on local fishers; it led to competition on fishing grounds, depletion of fish stocks due to overfishing, and changes in access to marine resources, which created ongoing conflicts and challenges related to fishing rights. Since then, disputes overfishing rights have plagued the area (Sowman, 2006; Sunde, 2016; Paganini *et al*., 2021). The introduction of motorized boats and contemporary fishing equipment over time revolutionized the St. Helena Bay fishing industry and changed the dynamics of resource allocation and extraction (van Sittert, 1992; van Sittert, 1993; Schultz, 2010).

4.2 Development of the Fishing Industry during the 20th Century

With the construction of canning and fish processing facilities, St. Helena Bay's commercial fishing industry expanded over the 20th century (van Sittert, 1993). The industry quickly grew on South Africa's west coast, and by 1910 canning factories had been established in both Saldanha and St Helena Bays. This expansion was fuelled by the growing demand for seafood around the world, technological developments that made harvesting and distribution more efficient, and the collapse of the American lobster fishery in 1905. But this expansion came at a price: small-scale and subsistence fishermen were marginalised, and marine resources were frequently overfished because of commercial fishing operations (Isaacs *et al*., 2022). Because of this, crayfish fishing continued to be very seasonal and dependent on both the supply of labour and crayfish. The distribution of *rantsoenvis*, or ration fish, a staple sustenance for labourers in rural areas, was strongly associated with its share-based system of operation (van Sittert, 1993). Depending on regional and cultural considerations, women's roles in the fishing business during this time ranged from processing and preserving fish to other duties. Women probably helped with sorting, packing, and processing the harvest in the labour-intensive activity of crayfish fishing (Ontong, 2023).

The introduction of trawlers and sophisticated fish processing methods marked the industrialization of fishing in St. Helena Bay. This shift reorganized the fishing economy as big commercial companies gained more sway over the industry (Sowman & Cardoso, 2010; Gough *et al.,* 2020). Although it became more difficult, traditional fishers (men and women) continue to informally engage in fishing activities (Branch and Clark, 2006). Small-scale fisheries faced increased competition for declining fish stocks because of the Western Cape's expanding commercial fishing industry, which disproportionately affected community-based fisherwomen (Isaacs, 2011b). Economic marginalisation was exacerbated by policies favouring large-scale, capital-intensive operations, often side-lining small-scale, artisanal practices, such as handline

fishing, and beach-seine operations, and activities that many women engaged in including the harvesting of mussels and other inshore resources (Ovetz, 2006; Sowman & Cardoso, 2010; Barnes *et al*., 2013).

The onset of apartheid in South Africa in 1948 resulted in substantial alterations for the fishing villages in St Helena Bay. Racial segregation rules influenced all facets of life, including residential and occupational opportunities. The draconian apartheid-era legislation exacerbated the marginalisation of small-scale and subsistence fishers, compelling them to engage in clandestine activities and operate under stringent restrictions to maintain their livelihoods (Sowman, 2006; Sunde, 2016; Paganini *et al.,* 2021). Notwithstanding these hurdles, the communities persisted in adapting and enduring, utilizing a combination of traditional knowledge and contemporary fishing techniques to maintain their livelihoods. The pelagic fishing industry, which thrived in the 1960s and 1970s and at its peak sustained thousands of jobs, employing numerous women in post-harvest operations, served as the foundation for the town's growth. Other significant livelihood activities included the harvesting of west coast rock lobster and net fishing (mostly for southern mullet), which were undertaken by many local fishermen close to the shore.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many local factory workers and fishermen lost their jobs because of a decrease in pelagic and line fish catches reduced production at and closing of certain industries (Jarre *et al.,* 2013). During this period, a significant transformation occurred in the roles of women in small-scale fisheries globally, driven by multiple socio-economic variables, such as the necessity for diverse household income and alterations in conventional gender roles (Béné, 2006). In St Helena Bay, this transition was characterized by a heightened involvement of women in traditionally male-dominated activities, including more active participation in fishing, boat ownership, and industry decision-making (Isaacs, 2012).

Following South Africa's transition to a post-apartheid era, the fisheries of St Helena Bay experienced considerable transformation due to the enactment of the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) of 1998, which sought to rectify historical inequalities and foster sustainable utilization of marine resources (Sowman, 2006). Initially, the fisheries transformation process concentrated mostly on the industry, neglecting the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector until the promulgation of the SSF Policy in 2012. Historically marginalised fisherwomen may now discover a new pathway for engagement in the industry, as the Act acknowledges traditional fishing rights and seeks to democratize access to marine resources (Isaacs, 2011a). The post-apartheid period, despite its assurances, has not been devoid of adversity. The introduction of new entrants and quota systems,

intended to promote equity, frequently failed to represent the realities of traditional fishing communities and unwittingly marginalised small-scale fisherwomen specifically (Raemaekers *et al*., 2011).

In 2012, a pivotal milestone occurred with the acknowledgment of small-scale fishing as a separate sector under the national fisheries policy framework. The Small-Scale Fisheries Policy (SSFP) represented a significant change by recognizing the distinct socio-economic and cultural aspects of small-scale fisheries, including their contributions to poverty reduction, food security, and sustainable livelihoods (Sowman *et al*., 2014). This policy underscored the significance of safeguarding tenure rights for traditional fishing communities, advocating for fair access to marine resources, and encouraging co-management strategies between the government and local fishing organisations. An essential element of this acknowledgment was the heightened visibility of fisherwomen as significant contributors to the sector.

4.3 SSFs in Present-day St Helena Bay

Industrial fishing and processing have influenced the social dynamics of St Helena Bay, distinguishing it from smaller adjacent towns such as Paternoster and Elands Bay (Schultz, 2010). However, industrialization has also introduced environmental issues, including overfishing, habitat degradation, and pollution, adversely affecting fish stocks and jeopardizing the sustainability of fisheries and the livelihoods reliant on them. Women in St Helena Bay play an indispensable role in fisheries, especially in the post-harvest sector. The snoek processing sector, referred to as "*snoek vlekking*," employs over 70 local women, most of whom have inherited their talents from their moms and grandmothers (Sunde *et al.,* 2024). They are also involved in net making, harvesting intertidal species (such as limpets, mussels, and periwinkles), and fish commercialization. Nonetheless, their contributions are frequently underestimated, and they encounter obstacles including restricted access to resources, training, and finance (Fröcklin *et al.,* 2013; Harper *et al*., 2013). Despite their participation, numerous women in St Helena Bay were first omitted from the DFFE verification process, securing their recognition as small-scale fishers only after judicial intervention in 2023 (Sunde *et al.,* 2024).

Climate change presents a considerable risk to small-scale fisheries, especially for fisherwomen reliant on nearshore marine resources for their sustenance. Increasing sea temperatures and altered fish migration patterns have resulted in diminished fish availability, disproportionately affecting individuals with restricted mobility, such as small-scale fishers (Jarre

et al., 2015; Deeg, 2023). Fisherwomen, specifically, encounter increased vulnerability due to their dependence on coastal fisheries, which are more prone to environmental variability and overexploitation (Cochrane *et al.,* 2009). Moreover, pollutants from industrial operations and heightened sedimentation resulting from upstream land use alterations have exacerbated habitat degradation, diminishing the already limited resources upon which these women rely (Sink *et al.,* 2012). The absence of robust environmental management regulations intensifies these challenges, placing fisherwomen in places such as St Helena Bay at heightened risk of economic and food poverty (Sowman *et al.,* 2020).

In addition to resource loss, climate change exacerbates pre-existing socio-economic and gender inequalities in the fishing industry. A multitude of fisherwomen participate in post-harvest activities, including fish processing and selling, which are directly influenced by diminishing fish populations and fluctuating environmental conditions (Deeg, 2023). Increased sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and severe weather phenomena lead to diminished fish catches and compromised coastal infrastructure, hence complicating access to fishing zones and markets (FAO, 2020). This unpredictability jeopardizes their immediate livelihood and long-term financial stability. In the absence of focused initiatives that tackle both environmental and socio-economic concerns, fisherwomen will persist in shouldering an inequitable burden due to climate change.

These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by conventional gender roles that frequently restrict fisherwomen's access to resources, decision-making authority, and adaptive methods. In numerous coastal communities, including St Helena Bay, women often hold more vulnerable positions than men due to systemic inequities (Center, 2010). This absence of agency impedes their capacity to respond adeptly to environmental changes and intensifies their economic marginalisation. Moreover, as women frequently bear the responsibility for maintaining household food security, diminishing fish populations compel them to pursue alternate food sources, so augmenting their labour and psychological stress (Wong, 2012). As climate change intensifies, these overlapping challenges highlight the necessity for gender-responsive policies that empower fisherwomen and bolster their resilience against environmental and economic volatility.

In response to these challenges, a 2012 study indicates that fisherwomen in St Helena Bay have formulated diverse coping strategies, including income diversification, collaboration with community organisations, and advocacy for policy reforms to ensure their access to marine resources (Lwenya and Yongo, 2012). Numerous individuals have pursued alternate professions, including seaweed collecting, tourism-related endeavours, and small-scale agriculture, to augment

their incomes (Jarre *et al.,* 2015). Simultaneously, they have fortified their social networks and community-based organisations to collaboratively navigate the evolving environmental and economic context. Notwithstanding these initiatives, fisherwomen in St Helena Bay persistently encounter systemic inequities, restricted access to resources, and inadequate support from policymakers and environmental managers (Lwenya and Yongo, 2012; Nyiawung *et al*., 2023).

4.4. Communities of Laingville, Steenberg's Cove and Stompneus Bay

The current socioeconomic divisions in St Helena Bay are a palpable testament to the country's historical legacies, and this division is starkly evident when considering the disparate conditions of the three settlements—Laingville, Steenberg's Cove, and Stompneus Bay — that are home to many of the small-scale fishers and factory workers (Figure 3, 4 and 5 respectively). These settlements, while close in proximity, exhibit distinct racial and economic disparities that are remnants of the apartheid era's spatial segregation policies (Western, 1981).

The settlement of Laingville, predominantly inhabited by coloured communities, marks the southernmost point of the town of St. Helena Bay. Most of St Helena Bay's population resides in Laingville, a township established in 1972 to meet the housing demands of Steenberg's Cove. Laingville is discreetly situated below the entrance to St Helena Bay, away from the prominent urban development billboards. Similar to other townships established under apartheid, Laingville possesses a single entrance (Schultz, 2010). Laingville residents experience the highest economic insecurity in St Helena Bay, marked by substantial asset poverty, reliance on cash, and food scarcity. Progress in Laingville has stagnated, illustrating the persistent economic division along racial lines (Schultz, 2015). Laingville's housing conditions consist of compact formal structures, accompanied by a rapidly expanding zone of informal structures on the periphery. The community experiences elevated unemployment rates and insufficient formal education levels (SA Census, 2011). This community has historically been engaged in the fishing industry, with many residents depending on it for their livelihoods. However, the imposition of restrictive fishing quotas and limited access to resources post-apartheid have exacerbated poverty levels (Sowman *et al.,* 2014).

Figure 3. The settlement of Laingville, in St Helena Bay.

Less than 10 kilometres away lies Steenberg's Cove, the oldest neighbourhood in St Helena Bay, a historically rich and tightly knit fishing community where traditional ways of life remain deeply embedded in daily routines. The area is characterised by informal housing nestled along the shoreline. Along the rocky shores, fisherwomen and young children gather periwinkles and mussels, continuing a long-standing tradition of intergenerational knowledge-sharing in sustainable marine harvesting (Minnaar, 2022).

This community has a history deeply intertwined with the fishing industry, with many residents relying on the sea for their livelihoods. In recent years, the inhabitants of Steenberg's Cove have encountered various obstacles. The reduction in fish populations, along with the seasonal characteristics of fishing, has resulted in economic difficulties. A multitude of fishers have had challenges in obtaining stable income, while the community has contended with matters concerning land development and access to fishing rights (Schultz, 2010).

Steenberg's Cove is increasingly facing pressure from urban development and real estate expansion. Large billboards advertising real estate projects now dominate the landscape, signalling a growing threat of commercialisation and gentrification. Long-term fisher residents express growing concern over the encroachment of city dwellers and investors, whose interest in waterfront properties poses a risk of displacement for the local community. This conflict escalated in 2010, when developers aimed to acquire land occupied by fisher families for a waterfront development project. The residents, acknowledging the cultural and historical importance of their homes, sought legal counsel to oppose the forced eviction. Their endeavours underscored the overarching challenge faced by small-scale fishing communities in safeguarding their residences, customs, and means of subsistence against escalating economic pressures and urbanization (Schultz, 2010; Minnaar, 2022).

Figure 4. The settlement of Steenberg's Cove, in St Helena Bay

Stompneus Bay, the third key settlement in St Helena Bay, is situated further inland compared to Laingville and Steenberg's Cove, between St Helena Bay and Shelley Point, suggesting a spatial and potentially economic divide within the larger community of St Helena Bay. The region predominantly consists of fishmeal factories, which explains its name derived from a particular fish species called the '*stompneus*.' The fishmeal plants are integral to the local economy and

culture, illustrating the profound relationship between the community and the marine ecosystem. The presence of *'stompneus*' in this region underscores its significance, both as a dietary staple and as a crucial component of the local fishing sector.

Figure 5. The settlement of Stompneus Bay, in St Helena Bay

According to the South African Census (2011), St Helena Bay had a recorded population of 5,515 people, which has since increased to 15,557 (SBM IDP 2022:9). Despite the region's dependence on fishing, economic disparities remain stark, with between 2,000 and 3,000 people actively engaged in the fishing sector, including approximately 400 small-scale fishers (SA Census, 2011). Many of these small-scale fishers operate within an increasingly competitive and highly regulated industry, facing challenges such as rising operational costs, declining fish stocks due to climate change and overfishing, and limited governmental support for community-based fisheries (Sunde *et al.*, 2024).

The fishing communities of St Helena Bay have endured generations of challenges, yet their resilience persists, deeply embedded in a rich cultural identity shaped by their enduring relationship with the sea (Schultz, 2010). A key element in this enduring strength is the role played by women, historically the backbone of fishing households. Their contributions extend beyond

domestic responsibilities to active participation in the fishing economy, often overlooked in mainstream narratives but crucial for community sustenance and growth (Weeratunge *et al*., 2014).

In 2022, a community-based fisher household survey in Laingville, Stompneus Bay, and Steenberg's Cove revealed that 200 recognised small-scale interim relief (IR) fishers were operating in St Helena Bay, though many more legitimate fishers and young people were excluded from official registration as SSFs. This survey highlighted the significant impact of the seasonal characteristics of SSF fisheries on food security and income for fishing households. Fisher households continue to experience poverty and vulnerability to food insecurity at various times throughout the year. In 2022, the annual income of an IR fisherman varied from R20,000 to R71,000, well beneath the poverty threshold (Sunde *et al*., 2024).

The most important fish species from a food security and income perspective include Snoek, Cape bream, and west coast rock lobster. Snoek is highly seasonal, peaking in the winter months. Cape bream is available year-round but peaks in December and January, while contributes a vital but declining source of income. The reduction in the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for rock lobster over the past five years has had severe financial consequences, with individual earnings from crayfish permits dropping as low as R6,000 per annum (Sunde *et al.,* 2024).

St Helena Bay is widely recognised as the heart of South Africa's pelagic fishing industry, playing a critical role in both local livelihoods and national fish production. Despite the economic significance of the fishing industry, the overall income disparity in the region is widening. The Gini coefficient for Saldanha Bay Municipality increased from 0.58 in 2014 to 0.62 in 2021, reflecting growing inequality. While commercial fisheries and fish processing contribute significantly to the local economy—accounting for 29% of jobs in the municipality—the small-scale sector continues to struggle with job insecurity and low earnings. The unemployment rate in the municipality rose from 14.2% in 2010 to 23.1% in 2021, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating financial instability (Sunde *et al.,* 2024).

The post-apartheid period has been marked by attempts to redress these imbalances, with policies aimed at equitable resource distribution. However, the effectiveness of these policies has been uneven, and the socioeconomic division based on race remains a defining feature of St Helena Bay's settlements. The historic and systemic barriers to equal opportunity continue to influence the social fabric and economic outcomes for the people living in Laingville, Steenberg's Cove, and Stompneus Bay. Academics argue that the true measure of post-apartheid fisheries policies should not only be assessed in the biomass of fish stocks but in the social equity and cultural

vitality they foster (Isaacs, 2011b). In this respect, the fisherwomen of St Helena Bay are not just part of the narrative; they are crafting it with every tide they ride and every net they cast.

5. Research Findings: Women's Contributions, Challenges, and Agency in St Helena Bay's small-scale fishing sector

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted in St Helena Bay, combined with relevant literature to provide a comprehensive account of the roles and experiences of small-scale fisherwomen in the sector as well as factors affecting their full participation in the fisheries sector. The chapter begins with a summary of the key themes that emerged from the interviews, followed by a detailed discussion of the various roles that these fisherwomen play and how these roles have evolved over time. The chapter ends with an examination of the challenges experienced by women in the sector and factors impeding their recognition and full participation in the sector.

The chapter explores the experiences of fisherwomen in the region, revealing the deeply ingrained cultural practices and familial legacies that shape their identities and livelihoods. Through interviews and firsthand accounts, these women provided insight into the enduring traditions and evolving challenges they face as they navigate the male-dominated world of fishing, while maintaining the knowledge and skills passed down through generations. Their stories highlight both the continuity and the change in the ways they contribute to their families and their communities.

5.2 Themes

This section examines the lived experiences of small-scale fisherwomen in St Helena Bay, concentrating on the themes that surfaced during interviews with 17 women from three local fishing communities. The respondents vary in age, household composition, and years of experience in the fishing industry, providing a diverse set of perspectives. Almost all the women interviewed come from families that have long been involved in fishing, revealing a deep connection to this way of life. The interviews revealed both the historical and cultural importance of their roles, as well as the distinct challenges and possibilities they encounter presently.

Several prominent themes arose from the interviews, focusing on familial and communal interactions, economic difficulties, and the obstacles faced within the fishing sector. Subthemes included familial legacy, household obligations, gender roles in domestic and professional contexts, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Several women discussed the effects of COVID-19 on their livelihoods, emphasizing the essential requirement for community and governmental assistance during times of crisis. Furthermore, regulatory obstacles and the impacts of modernization, especially in fishmeal production facilities, were identified as significant concerns.

The 17 women who participated in the study represent the three primary fishing communities of St Helena Bay (see Table 2). Nearly all of them can trace their family roots to fishing activities that have historically been the backbone of this coastal region. The interviews revealed diverse roles and responsibilities that fisherwomen undertake, shaped by their social, political and cultural environments. These roles include managing household finances, maintaining fishing nets, processing and preserving the catch, harvesting of intertidal resources, and even contributing to the overall income through small-scale enterprises. Despite the numerous challenges they face, the resilience and adaptability of these women stand out. Their narratives not only illuminate the complexities of being a fisherwoman in this region but also underscore their essential role in sustaining both their families and their communities. The sections below describe the key roles and responsibilities identified through the research, drawing from the interview transcripts as well as other secondary data sources, including a recent legal case (Adams and Others vs Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy and Others, 2022) and the relevant literature.

Table 2. Self-identified main role of research respondents

Respondent #	Community	Role in the SSF
1	Laingville	Snoek vlekker
2	Laingville	Snoek vlekker
3	Steenberg's Cove	Net mending, Weskusmandjie[1] (harvester and entrepreneur)
4	Laingville	Factory worker

[1] Weskusmandjie is a collective of women dedicated to processing and marketing a variety of seafood products.

5	Steenberg's Cove	Weskusmandjie (harvester and entrepreneur)
6	Steenberg's Cove	Weskusmandjie (harvester and entrepreneur)
7	Steenberg's Cove	ABALOBI Quality Control
8	Laingville	Snoek vlekker
9	Steenberg's Cove	Factory worker
10	Laingville	Snoek vlekker, ABALOBI Quality Control
11	Steenberg's Cove	Factory worker, net mending
12	Steenberg's Cove	Factory worker
13	Steenberg's Cove	Snoek vlekker, ABALOBI Quality Control
14	Steenberg's Cove	Net mending, Weskusmandjie (harvester and entrepreneur)
15	Stompneus Bay	Factory worker
16	Stompneus Bay	Factory worker
17	Stompneus Bay	Factory worker

5.3 The different roles of women in the small-scale fisheries value chain

5.3.1 Women as harvesters

Fisherwomen in St Helena Bay have long been involved in the harvesting of marine resources, carrying forward a tradition that has sustained their families and communities for generations. Of the women interviewed, 12 specifically recalled how their mothers and grandmothers harvested a variety of marine intertidal resources, such as mussels, limpets, and periwinkles, which were gathered for food. These women referred to their knowledge of the tides and seasons as well as the hand-gathering techniques they had acquired from their mothers and grandmothers.

Most of the women interviewed mentioned how significant changes have affected both the availability of these marine resources and the methods used to harvest them. Environmental factors such as overfishing and habitat degradation have reduced the abundance of key species that

previous generations relied upon. Respondents 3, 5, 6, and 14, explained how today they frequently gather seaweed and mussels from the shoreline, often using them to produce traditional products like pickled mussels or sea lettuce salt, which they sell through local markets and platforms like the Abalobi pantry[2]. These women have adapted to changing conditions by finding new ways to utilise the remaining resources, such as the seaweed and mussels, but they still face numerous challenges.

A couple of respondents from Steenberg's Cove (9 and 12) spoke with pride about how their children and grandchildren still enjoy heading to the beach after school to catch "*klipvis.*" While these women hope for a more stable future for the younger generations—one with job security and less uncertainty than they have experienced in the fishing sector—they take great joy in seeing their children and grandchildren partake in the same activities that shaped their own childhoods. It is a reminder of the simple pleasures of their youth and the continuity of their connection to the sea. Though the future they envision for their children may be different, the pride in passing down this love for the ocean remains strong.

Growing up, most of these women depended on the shore to provide food, especially during bad weather when no boats could go out to sea. Years later, they still hold the skills that their mothers and grandmothers taught them. For example, they can easily identify the best harvesting locations, they understand the ebb and flow of the tides and employ traditional methods to gather seafood such as mussels, limpets, periwinkles, and seaweed. Importantly, their practices are guided by a deep awareness of the need to protect and sustain these resources, ensuring that harvesting is done in ways that allow stocks to replenish and the ecosystem to remain healthy for future generations.

"We would harvest shellfish and cook it on the beach. We had a wonderful life as children on the beach. I thoroughly enjoyed my childhood; our playground was the beach." (Fisherwoman 11).

"To harvest the kelp, you have to use sharp little scissors to cut if off because you have to leave a piece behind, stuck to the rocks in order for it to grow again." (Fisherwoman 5)

[2] ABALOBI is a social enterprise and mobile application suite designed to support small-scale fishing communities by improving their livelihoods and promoting responsible fishing practices. The Abalobi pantry is a digital marketplace designed to connect consumers directly with products made by fisher communities created in 2019.

5.3.2 Participation in the value chain

All the women interviewed contributed to the small-scale fisheries value chain, including in post-harvest activities such as processing, packaging, and selling the catch. These are activities that take place before and after the fish are harvested by fishermen from the sea. Some of these activities include preparing bait of different kind, preparing meals for fishers (their husband or family members), inspecting and mending nets, and sorting, cleaning, gutting and filleting fish. Other activities such as salting, smoking, selling whole fish and preparing different fish products. However, rarely will they be involved in more than one aspect of the value chain simultaneously. Snoek *vlekkers* don't clean Cape bream or yellowtail, they only work on snoek; factory workers don't usually mend nets. Clearly some of the skills needed for certain jobs were either passed down to them from older generations or learned over time with a lot of dedication. Of all the women interviewed, only 3 fisherwomen worked in more than one aspect of the value chain (for example, mending nets and harvesting seaweed and pickling mussels).

"I learned how to vlek snoek from my mom. I must go with my mom to the harbour and watch. First, I wash the fish. Every day I must wash, then my mamma says no, come, do the rest" (Fisherwoman 10).

5.3.2.1 pre-and post-harvesting

The role of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay extends far beyond the actual harvesting of fish. In this community, women play a critical part in both pre- and post-harvesting processes, particularly during the snoek season, which usually runs from April to July. These activities, frequently inherited across generations, necessitate specialized skills crucial for preserving the quality of the harvest and bolstering the local fishing industry. *Snoek vlekking* is a longstanding tradition, with numerous women acquiring the skill from their moms, sisters, and other female relatives.

During snoek season, four of the fisherwomen interviewed work as snoek cleaners and flakers ("*vlekkers*"). Snoek flaking is a skill traditionally passed down through generations of women in both the family and the broader community. Fisherwoman 2 shared that she, her mother, and her younger sister all used to flake fish, although she no longer does. She added that it was her

younger sister who taught her the intricacies of the process. The practice of "*vlekking*" involves washing, gutting, and salting the snoek as quickly as possible to preserve its quality and prevent it from becoming "pap" (soft and unsuitable for consumption). Fisherwoman 10 fondly recalled her childhood trips to the harbour, where she would watch her mother diligently washing the snoek. It was a scene she observed many times, fascinated by the process and the skill her mother brought to the task. However, the day eventually came when her mother turned to her and said, "No more watching—now you must do it yourself." This moment marked a turning point, as she moved from being an observer to an active participant in the family's work. It was her first real introduction to the demanding yet rewarding world of snoek "*vlekking*", a skill that she would carry with her into adulthood, and one that became a foundational part of her identity as a fisherwoman.

Fisherwoman 13 indicated that she has been *vlekking* snoek for 26 years and currently leads a team of 16 workers, comprised of 6 *vlekkers*, 6 washers, 2 workers who place the snoek on the table, 1 person who cuts off the heads, and 1 who salts the fish. Currently, the team is paid R8 per snoek by the *langanas* (fish marketers), with R4 going to the *vlekkers*, R1 each to the washers, the boys assisting with the placement of the fish on the table, the person salting the fish, and the one cutting off the heads. Fisherwoman 13 emphasized that the *vlekkers* are acutely aware of how little they are paid, with the R1 earned by the washers being insufficient to support a household, particularly when catches are low. The price, however, is set by the *langanas* and remains largely stagnant.

Attempts to negotiate higher pay have been unsuccessful, as the *langanas* refuse to increase the price. If the fisherwomen decline the work, the *langanas* simply take the catch elsewhere, finding someone else along the road willing to flake the fish for the same rate. Fisherwoman 10 recounted how, in the past, the *langanas* were more supportive of the flakers, offering loans when needed, driving them home from the harbour after long shifts, and even cooking meals for them while they worked. This sense of care and support has diminished over time, adding to the difficulties these women face in their work today.

Fisherwoman 13 went on to explain that there are seven teams of snoek *vlekkers* working in St Helena Bay. According to her, all snoek *vlekkers*, the skippers of snoek-targeting boats, and the *langanas* (fish marketers) are members of the same WhatsApp group. In this group, skippers provide updates on the day's catch, and *langanas* purchase the catch from specific boats and notify the snoek flakers when and where they will be working. Typically, a *langana* buys an entire boat's catch and hires one team of flakers to process it. On productive fishing days, boats return to the

harbour around noon, allowing the fisherwomen ample time to work through the catch. However, on less successful days, boats may stay out until later in the afternoon, around 4 p.m., which means the team of flakers often works late into the evening. Fisherwoman 13's team can process up to 1,000 snoek in just two hours when conditions are favourable.

Respondent 2 said that during the snoek season, *vlekking* snoek is their primary and sometimes only source of income. The unpredictability of the fishing industry makes it difficult for the fisherwomen to commit to other forms of work. In the off-season, many take up part-time jobs in the local community, offering domestic services or selling homemade goods and food products to supplement their household income. Despite this, the snoek season presents its own set of challenges. Fisherwoman 1 highlighted the increasing competition from men for jobs that have traditionally been held by women. While fishing and going out to sea is still seen as predominantly male work, snoek *vlekking* has been women's domain for generations. Yet, in St Helena Bay, some men have started to enter this line of work, adding further competition. Snoek *vlekking* requires a high level of skill and physical endurance, and the constant competition with men who are now also *vlekking* snoek has made it more difficult for these women to secure the steady work they rely on during the season.

Despite these challenges, all the fisherwomen who work as snoek flakers expressed their love for the job and their desire to continue *vlekking* snoek. However, when asked if they would want their daughters to follow in their footsteps, most said “no”. They described the work as tough, with no real job security, and a way of life that they do not wish upon their children, hoping instead for a future with greater stability and opportunities for their daughters.

“I learned about all the types of fish. I've learned how to wash snoek. That was the first thing that I've learned and my challenge was when I went to the harbour, sitting like, you know, I'm sitting here waiting for my husband to come in with the boat and see what they caught and how was the catch and everything then something just tell me, wait man go to the shed where the other girls and the women work because I see girls, young girls, young women, older women and to see if I can go get a job for me and try it out and see what it's all about. It was tough in the beginning because it was hard work because you have to lay over the tank and wash that fish when it comes to cleaning it, cutting it up…”

(Fisherwoman 7).

5.3.2.2 Net mending

Some of the older fisherwomen in St Helena Bay are involved in the skilled craft of mending purse seine nets for commercial fisheries and crayfish nets for the SSF sector, a tradition passed down through generations. Net mending is typically seasonal work, and the two respondents who participate in this task rely on other forms of employment throughout the rest of the year. Fisherwoman 14, who has been mending nets for over 30 years, learned the skill from her mother. She explained that when commercial boats require their nets to be repaired, local fisherwomen are called upon to handle the delicate and time-consuming task. These women are often provided with transportation to the harbours where the work is needed, and they are paid a daily rate for their efforts.

Fisherwoman 3 also works mending nets and shared that she has travelled as far as Hout Bay in Cape Town to mend nets for the day, underscoring the reach and demand for their skills. She has travelled as far as Mossel Bay, Gqeberha and Gansbaai as well, working in different places for two weeks at a time. Although she admitted that net mending can be tedious at times, she finds great satisfaction in the work. One of the aspects she enjoys most is the social nature of the job—working alongside other fisherwomen in a collaborative environment, where they can chat and share stories as they mend the nets together. This sense of camaraderie offers a reprieve from the solitary nature of other fishing-related tasks and fosters a close-knit community among the women who work together. Fisherwoman 11 worked in the fish factories during the season (January to October) and mended nets in Vredenburg in the off season (October to January). The company in Vredenburg organises transport to fetch the women in St Helena at 6.15am and they work mending nets until 5pm most days, unless the fishermen drop the nets at their homes late in the afternoon or are in a hurry to get their nets back, then they need to work overtime.

> *"Netmaking and mending is one of the traditions in Steenberg's Cove. The women from our area are well known for their net mending skills and the large commercial trawling companies pay us to mend their nets in their resting season over December and January"* (Fisherwoman 14).

5.3.2.3 Factory work

There are many fishing factories in St Helena Bay, although many of them have closed down in recent years. Almost half of the women interviewed have worked in the local fish factories at some point in their lives, both the canneries and cold storage facilities. According to the respondents, in the early days, only women worked in the factories, while the men worked as crew on the factory boats or used their own small boats. The local factories produce canned fish and fishmeal from the pelagic fish harvested. Fisherwoman 17 talked about how the jobs at the fish factories have changed over time. When her grandmother worked at the factory where she now works, most of the work was done by hand. The first team cleaned the fish while the second team packed it into the tins. Nowadays, a lot of the work is done by machines. Women pack the tins into the boxes and are also given supervisory roles while the men that work in the factories deal with the heavy lifting jobs, like moving crates of fish into the factory and carrying the full boxes to the storage area.

"In the factory the women stand around the tables and pack the fish. The fish goes into the machine, the heads get removed. Then it goes in again and the tail is removed. Then it goes to the bottom of the can, and we pack it nicely before it gets a lid" (Fisherwoman 4).

"I started working when I was 14 years old. I first went with my grandmother to work, and she showed me what they do at the factory. She taught me and I helped to dye the fish and make haddock" (Fisherwoman 8)

Many of the women who currently work or have worked in the fish factories in St Helena Bay express a sense of appreciation for the job, primarily due to the camaraderie they share with their fellow fisherwomen. Being surrounded by others who understand their experiences and share similar backgrounds provides a sense of community and mutual support during long shifts. Fisherwoman 15, for example, mentioned that while the work itself is not particularly difficult, the opportunity to be among friends and peers makes the experience more enjoyable. Although her mother and grandmother both worked in fish factories as well, they were employed at different facilities, and she did not directly learn the skills from them. For her, the job in the factory is less about continuing a family tradition and more about adapting to the needs of the work environment.

Unlike some traditional fishing practices that are handed down through generations, the skills required for factory work are usually learned on the job. New workers are often guided by colleagues who have been with the factory longer, sharing their expertise and helping newcomers adjust to the specific demands of the role. This practical, on-site learning process differs significantly from the intergenerational transmission of knowledge seen in activities like snoek flaking or net mending. It highlights how factory work has evolved into a more modern, structured form of employment, where skills are acquired through peer mentorship rather than through family ties.

However, as Fisherwoman 11 pointed out, the nature of factory employment has changed, making it more challenging for the younger generation. She noted that many younger people today do not work in the fish factories, often due to a lack of experience and limited opportunities for entry. When factories need to hire, they typically prefer to rehire retrenched staff who already have experience and can quickly integrate back into the workflow. This preference for rehiring experienced workers means that younger, less-experienced community members are often left out of potential job opportunities, further narrowing the already limited employment prospects in St Helena Bay. As a result, the workforce in these factories has become increasingly composed of those with longstanding ties to the industry, while the younger generation seeks out other avenues of work.

The factory work structure has evolved significantly over the years. Today, most factories operate with two distinct shifts: a day shift and a night shift, providing a more predictable work schedule for the employees. However, this was not always the case. When the mothers and grandmothers of the current fisherwomen worked in these factories, the approach was far more demanding. There were no shift changes; instead, the women worked continuously until the entire catch from the boats was processed. This meant long, unpredictable hours, often stretching late into the night until every task was completed, and every fish was cleaned and packed. Subsequent to the democratic transition in 1994, amendments to South Africa's legal framework established enhanced protections for fish factory workers, notably via the Labour Relations Act (No. 66 of 1995), which conferred upon workers in the fishing sector the rights to unionize, engage in collective bargaining, and contest unfair labour practices, signifying a substantial departure from the formerly exploitative conditions in fish processing facilities (Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995).

Fisherwoman 9, who now works in one of these modernised factories, shares the challenges that still come with balancing work and family life. She and her husband are employed in the same

factory, but to manage their household and care for their four children, they are forced to work alternating shifts. One takes the day shift, while the other handles the night shift, ensuring that at least one parent is always at home to look after their children. This arrangement helps them manage childcare but comes with its own sacrifices. With their shifts rarely align, there are times when she does not see her husband for days, leading to a sense of disconnection within the family despite working under the same roof.

The present-day shift system may provide a more structured routine compared to the past, but it does not necessarily lessen the burden on families like hers. The separation of shifts means that families often struggle with maintaining their relationships while meeting the demands of their jobs. This dynamic reflects a broader tension in the fishing community, where balancing work and family life remains a constant challenge, even as the conditions in factories have evolved. While the physical toll may be lessened with the introduction of shifts, the emotional and social strains persist, highlighting the complex realities faced by modern-day fisherwomen and their families.

5.3.3 Caregivers

Of the 17 fisherwomen interviewed in St Helena Bay, 15 have children living at home, and more than 10 of them share their households with both children and grandchildren (Figure 6). These multi-generational living arrangements are not uncommon in the community and reflect the close-knit nature of their families. Balancing their roles as providers and caregivers, these women adapt their work schedules to accommodate the needs of their families. They often arrange their tasks around their children's school hours, ensuring that they are home to prepare meals, manage the household, and attend to other daily responsibilities.

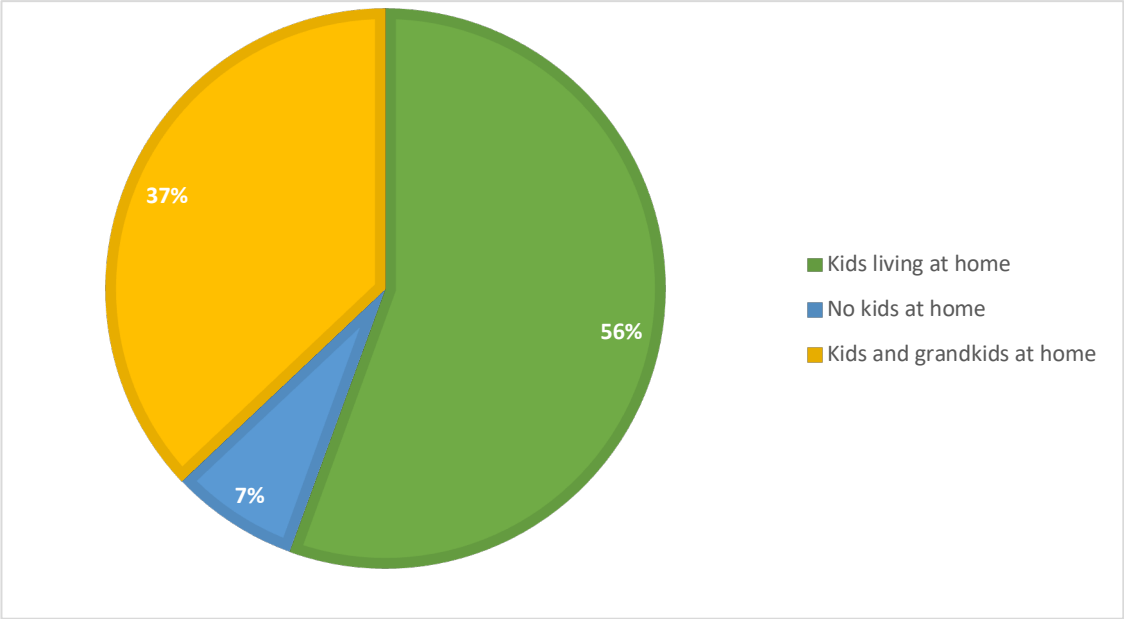

Figure 6. Percentage of respondents with children and grandchildren living at home at the time of the interviews.

For those with older children, the family dynamic becomes a crucial support system, especially during the busiest work periods. Older siblings often step in to care for their younger brothers and sisters or help with household chores like cooking and cleaning, especially when their mothers have long shifts at the harbour or are working on seasonal jobs such as cleaning large catches of snoek or mending nets in nearby towns. This collaboration within the household helps alleviate some of the pressures these women face, allowing them to seize work opportunities that are both seasonal and weather-dependent without compromising the care of their families.

The reliance on family support is especially important given the nature of their work, which can vary greatly from day to day. Some days may require long hours away from home, while others offer more flexibility, allowing them to return to their families earlier in the day. This adaptability is key to their ability to sustain their households financially while fulfilling their roles as mothers and grandmothers. Despite the challenges, these fisherwomen remain committed to providing for their families, using their time and resources as effectively as possible to ensure that their loved ones are cared for, even during the demanding snoek season or when traveling for net-mending work.

From my interviews, it became evident that caring for children and grandchildren represents only a portion of these fisherwomen's responsibilities as caregivers. Their role extends far beyond traditional childcare, encompassing the support of their husbands, brothers, and sons

who work as fishermen. These men often spend long hours at sea, leaving their homes before dawn to make the most of the day's fishing conditions. The women, however, are awake even earlier, ensuring that their loved ones are well-prepared for the demanding day ahead.

Each morning, they rise before the first light to pack lunch boxes for the fishermen in their lives, carefully preparing meals that include sandwiches and cooked fish from the previous day's catch. This daily routine is not just about providing food; it is a gesture of care and support, symbolizing the strong family bonds that sustain their households. The preparation of these meals reflects the women's efforts to ensure that the men have the nourishment they need for the strenuous work at sea, despite the early hour and their own demanding schedules.

Their caregiving responsibilities do not end when the fishermen leave. Throughout the day, the women continue to manage the household, take care of younger family members, and often juggle their own work commitments, whether in the local fish factories, on the shores, or managing other small-scale income-generating activities. This continuous cycle of caregiving and work highlights the central role these women play in maintaining the stability and well-being of their families, making their contributions vital to both the household and the broader fishing community of St Helena Bay.

Growing up, many of the women interviewed spoke about the difficult decision to leave school before completing their education, often driven by the need to support their families. For some, this meant taking on the responsibility of caring for younger siblings, while for others, it meant finding work to contribute financially to their household. Employment opportunities were often limited to the local fish factories, where they could earn money to help meet their families' needs. Fisherwoman 11, for instance, left school at the age of 15 to assist her mother with expenses when her father fell ill. Her early entry into the workforce was a sacrifice that shaped her life, yet it also exemplifies the resilience and determination shared by many women in similar situations.

"I started working in 1983. I left school in 1982 because my father was sick. I had to start working to help my mother..." (Fisherwoman 11).

The challenges of caregiving have persisted into their adult lives, as they now care for their own children and, in some cases, grandchildren. Fisherwoman 2, for example, is a dedicated caregiver to her 33-year-old son, who is struggling with drug addiction. She feels a deep sense of responsibility for his well-being and spends much of her time managing his condition, all while

trying to maintain a sense of normalcy and stability for the rest of her family. With four other children, two of whom still live with her, she faces the constant pressure of balancing her son's needs with the future prospects of her other children. Her days are filled with the dual burdens of caregiving and the persistent worry about what lies ahead for her family, making her role both emotionally and physically taxing. Similarly, Fisherwoman 11 shoulders significant responsibilities as the primary caregiver in her household, looking after her children and grandchildren. Among her duties is caring for her daughter, who has developmental problems, requiring ongoing attention and support.

Fisherwomen often take on the responsibility of caring not only for their immediate families but also for the elders within their communities. This caregiving extends beyond their own relatives to include older members of the community who may need assistance. In the close-knit fishing communities of Steenberg's Cove, Laingville, and Stompneus Bay, a strong sense of solidarity prevails, with neighbours looking out for one another and offering support whenever possible. These communities are characterised by a collective ethos where the well-being of each member is a shared concern, and the role of fisherwomen as caregivers plays a crucial part in maintaining this social fabric.

A recurring sentiment among the fisherwomen interviewed is a desire for their children to find careers outside of the small-scale fishing industry. Few of their children work in the fishing sector, as many mothers hope to steer them away from the hardships and unpredictability that have long characterised their own livelihoods. The declining availability of fish, the seasonal nature of the work, and the instability of income in the fishing industry have led these women to encourage their children to seek more secure and diversified job prospects. They wish for their children to experience a more stable life, free from the uncertainties that have made their own work so challenging.

Fisherwoman 11, for example, shared that her four children have chosen not to pursue work in the fisheries sector, a decision for which she feels immense gratitude. For her, this represents a positive change—an opportunity for her children to build a different future, one that is not constrained by the economic struggles that accompany small-scale fishing. Her feelings reflect a broader hope among many of the fisherwomen that, while they remain proud of their heritage and their work, their children will be able to pursue paths that offer greater security and opportunities for growth. This shift in perspective highlights the evolving aspirations within these communities,

where the desire for a better future is deeply intertwined with the values of hard work and perseverance passed down through generations.

5.3.4 Entrepreneurs/marketers

In coastal communities like St Helena Bay, fisherwomen engage in entrepreneurial activities that not only sustain their families but also draw upon and promote their rich cultural heritage. Over the years, a few of the women interviewed have taken on entrepreneurial ventures, drawing from their deep knowledge of the sea and traditional practices. These efforts have not only provided economic opportunities but also strengthened community bonds, especially through the creation of cooperative groups. One such example is the collective efforts of women producing and marketing indigenous products, combining economic resilience with cultural preservation.

The challenges these women face often fuel their entrepreneurial spirit, prompting them to create businesses that support both their families and their communities. One notable example is Weskusmandjie, a group of five women from Steenberg's Cove who have worked together and created a small business. These women have been producing a variety of indigenous products that highlight the rich cultural traditions of the West Coast. Of the fisherwomen interviewed, 4 are active members of Weskusmandjie and shared their journey of starting and developing this small but strong enterprise into what it is today.

Founded in 2017, Weskusmandjie is a collective of women dedicated to processing and marketing a variety of seafood products that was born out of economic necessity and communal support. Traditionally reliant on the sea for their livelihood, the group of women who comprise Weskusmandjie all have a very long history of working in the fisheries sector in the St Helena Bay region. Two of the women still work as net menders for the large commercial boats as well as making crayfish nets. Some of them harvest intertidal resources to put basic food on the tables for their families. St Helena Bay has been hard hit by retrenchments in the fishing sector, coupled with the general poverty and unemployment that impacts many poorer communities on the West Coast. This has been made harder by the fact that DFFE (previously DAFF) has failed to ensure that traditional fishing communities are given priority in the allocation of rights to marine resources.

"Yes, actually we want to have a little building up there by the beach ..., we also want to make things like salt and pickles. We want to be on the beach" (Fisherwoman 3).

Some of the key challenges women face in expanding their market reach include adhering to general food hygiene standards and identifying consistent and accessible markets for their products. Since 2019, the fisherwomen of Weskusmandjie have been actively participating in a service-learning project in collaboration with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). This initiative has provided them with training in crucial areas such as food safety and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP), equipping them with the knowledge needed to maintain high standards in food production. Fisherwoman 6 says the training enabled them to expand their range of products, including the development of new offerings like their black mussel pickle. This partnership has also been instrumental in helping them diversify their skills, allowing them to create a variety of local arts and crafts, such as coasters, keyrings, and gift bags, which have become popular items at regional Christmas markets.

Weskusmandjie currently specialises in high-quality pickled and smoked seafood, bokkom biltong[3], and sea lettuce salt. The women state that their core mission has always been to utilise the rich marine resources of the West Coast, combining traditional methods with modern production techniques. Over time, they have broadened their product range to include innovative uses of locally sourced ingredients, such as sour fig jam, limpets, and sea lettuce salt. According to Fisherwoman 6, each product is crafted using recipes that have been passed down through generations, blending time-honoured knowledge with a touch of creativity to create unique offerings that reflect the flavours of their heritage.

> *"The parents, grandparents you know, you were raised with it. I think I can do a pickling recipe just by smelling it, because we grew up with our grandma's pots on the stove"*
> (Fisherwoman 14 talking about pickling limpets which she does as part of Weskusmandjie).

Fisherwoman 5 proudly stated that the project has not only enhanced their technical skills but has also fostered a sense of pride and accomplishment as they develop new products that celebrate their heritage. The opportunity to learn and grow alongside CPUT students has opened new avenues for creativity and entrepreneurship, blending the fisherwomen's traditional knowledge with contemporary practices. Their participation in the project has allowed them to bring their stories and the essence of the West Coast into every product, whether it is a jar of black

[3] Whole-dried Southern Mullet. They are made by salting the mullet and drying them in the sun and wind.

mussel pickle, or a handcrafted item sold at a market. These products have become a means of sharing their rich cultural legacy with the wider community while providing additional income streams.

According to the interviewed members of Weskusmandjie, one of the most cherished outcomes of this collaboration is their work with students from CPUT's Consumer Science Programme to create a local recipe book—a long-held dream for the women of Weskusmandjie. This book, which is still in preparation, aims to capture the essence of their culinary traditions, preserving recipes that have been passed down through generations. For the fisherwomen, this project represents more than just a collection of recipes; it is a way to document their heritage, celebrate their way of life, and share the flavours of the West Coast with a broader audience. They believe that this recipe book, once completed, will stand as a testament to their resilience, creativity, and dedication to preserving their cultural identity for future generations.

In August 2019, Weskusmandjie, in partnership with ABALOBI, and other women fishers from coastal communities, launched the ABALOBI Pantry—a digital marketplace designed to connect consumers directly with products made by fisher communities. This initiative focuses on working with local fishers, to market goods derived from coastal resources, such as pickled seafood, dried seaweed, jams, and other artisanal products, directly with potential buyers. The initiative has a strong emphasis on showcasing the work of women producers.

According to fisherwoman 6, the members of Weskusmandjie played a pivotal role in the co-design of the ABALOBI Pantry, ensuring that the platform meets the needs and realities of small-scale producers. They collaborated closely with the platform's developers, sharing insights from their experiences to shape a marketplace that is user-friendly and adaptable to the specific demands of coastal communities. This active involvement in the design process has allowed Weskusmandjie to not only benefit from the marketplace but also to shape it in a way that directly supports their entrepreneurial efforts. For Weskusmandjie, the ABALOBI Pantry has opened new avenues for generating income beyond local markets, offering them access to consumers who value sustainable, locally sourced products. It has become an important tool in diversifying their revenue streams, helping to create financial stability for the fisherwomen involved.

Weskusmandjie is currently registered as a private company (PTY), but the four fisherwomen involved expressed a desire to transition it into a non-profit organisation (NPO). They believe that operating as an NPO would provide greater access to funding opportunities, enabling them to expand their activities and continue developing new products. As an NPO,

Weskusmandjie could apply for grants and other forms of financial support specifically available for community-driven initiatives, which are often restricted to non-profit entities. This shift would not only help sustain their business operations but also allow them to contribute more meaningfully to the community's needs.

The women envision using the additional resources to offer expanded training programs for other fisherwomen in the community, sharing the skills they have gained through their own experiences and collaborations. These programs would aim to empower local women by equipping them with the knowledge and techniques needed to thrive in both traditional and new aspects of the small-scale fishing industry. The goal is to foster a culture of skill-sharing and mutual support, ensuring that more women in St Helena Bay can benefit from sustainable fishing practices and the economic opportunities they bring.

In addition to training, the fisherwomen said that they hope to broaden their impact through educational initiatives focused on ocean conservation and protection. As part of their vision, they plan to run awareness campaigns in local schools, teaching children about the importance of preserving marine resources and the role that sustainable fishing plays in protecting their coastal environment. By reaching out to school-aged children, Weskusmandjie aims to cultivate a new generation of environmentally conscious community members who understand the delicate balance required to maintain the ocean’s health. Transitioning to an NPO would enable Weskusmandjie to not only continue their work as producers of local seafood products but also to become leaders in community development and environmental stewardship in their region.

Many of the fisherwomen interviewed are also entrepreneurs and marketers, finding creative ways to support their families through diverse income streams. Fisherwoman 4, for example, worked for 26 years in the fish factories of St Helena Bay as a fish packer, a role that involved long hours and hands-on experience with seafood processing. Nowadays, she has transitioned to a different line of work and is employed by the municipality, working at the local school. Despite this career shift, her connection to the fishing industry remains strong, as it continues to play an essential role in her family’s livelihood.

Her only son is a fisherman, and he lives with her, making them a close-knit, interdependent family unit. During the fishing season, he works on the anchovy and sardine boats, and in the off-season, he turns his focus to catching snoek, Cape bream, and southern mullet. Together, they have developed a symbiotic relationship where he catches the fish, and she uses her skills as a marketer

to sell their haul to local buyers. This family-based approach to the fishing business allows them to maintain a steady income, even in an industry that is often unpredictable.

5.3.5 Leaders

Fisherwoman 10 and her husband serve as key community leaders in Laingville. Together, they advocate for the needs of both fishermen and fisherwomen, ensuring that their concerns and challenges are heard in meetings with local officials and fisheries management officials. They spoke about their efforts to not only represent their community in discussions about policies and fishing regulations but also working to secure necessary resources like fishing rights, which are essential for the livelihood of many families in Laingville.

Their leadership proved especially critical during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when many fishing households faced economic uncertainty. The pair took on the responsibility of facilitating access to relief efforts, helping to ensure that their community received the support it needed. During the first wave of Covid-19 in March and April 2020, Fisherwoman 10, along with a few others, took the initiative to approach the local authorities, stressing the urgent need to continue working and earning an income despite the lockdown restrictions. Recognising the critical role they played in the community, the authorities began the process of identifying which individuals were the more permanent "*vlekkers"* in the area. This effort resulted in the issuance of Essential Workers permits, allowing these women to continue accessing the harbour and carrying out their work during the lockdown. Through their efforts, they helped to build resilience within their community, offering a lifeline to those struggling to navigate the challenges brought by the pandemic. Their commitment highlights the important role that local leaders play in maintaining the stability and strength of fishing communities during times of need.

Fisherwoman 6 played a similarly critical role during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the national lockdown measures disproportionately affected vulnerable communities, severely threatening the food security of many small-scale fishing communities in South Africa. The restrictions affected these communities hard, as many depend on daily fishing activities for their livelihoods. Fisherwoman 6 recalls that while the DFFE issued exemptions for both commercial and small-scale fishers (SSFs) holding fishing permits, significant challenges remained. With local markets shut down and travel restrictions in place, fishers were unable to transport their catch to traditional markets, and local marketers, who typically helped distribute their products, were

prohibited from operating. As a result, even those with permits struggled to find avenues to sell their fish, creating a dire situation for many families.

Recognising the urgency of the situation, Fisherwoman 6 stepped up as a community leader, advocating for the rights and needs of her fellow fishers. She lobbied government for special arrangements that would allow fishers to travel and access markets under specific conditions. These efforts resulted in an amendment to the National Regulations relevant to Covid, enabling informal fish traders to continue their operations, albeit under strict safety protocols. Through her persistent advocacy, Fisherwoman 6 helped secure these essential changes, allowing fishers to sell their catch and maintain a crucial source of income during an extremely challenging time.

Her leadership during the crisis not only provided a lifeline to her community but also highlighted the essential role that small-scale fishers play in maintaining local food systems. By fighting for the rights of informal traders and ensuring that the voices of small-scale fishers were heard at the government level, Fisherwoman 6 helped to mitigate some of the worst impacts of the lockdown on her community.

Fisherwoman 13 is a respected leader within her community, particularly among her team of "*vlekkers*", for whom she serves as the team leader. In this role, she not only coordinates their daily tasks but also advocates tirelessly for their rights and welfare. Recognizing the demanding nature of their work, Fisherwoman 13 has been a vocal proponent for standardized pay, seeking to establish a fair and transparent pay structure that reflects the hard work and skill required for snoek flaking. She believes that consistent, fair compensation is essential to provide her team with the financial stability they need to support their families.

In 2022, Fisherwoman 6 represented a fishers' organisation as part of the Coastal Advisory Forum (CAF) committee, a platform designed to foster communication and collaboration between government officials, researchers, and small-scale fishers. The forum aims to address critical issues related to the management and conservation of marine resources, with a specific focus on supporting small-scale fishing communities. During the more recent establishment of primary and secondary fishing co-ops in St Helena Bay, a couple of the fisherwomen interviewed also emerged as leaders, being directly involved in the co-ops[4] (Fisherwoman 6 and 13).

[4] The vast majority of interviews took place before the establishment of the co-ops in St Helena Bay; therefore, the subject did not come up during initial interviews but was discussed during the 2 follow-up interviews conducted in 2024.

5.3.6 Knowledge holders and teachers

Women also emerged as key knowledge holders and teachers to both younger girls and boys. Many of the skills that the women have passed down or taught over time were learned from their mothers and grandmothers. The interviews underscored the profound knowledge women possess about the sea and their significant role in its stewardship and sustainable management of resources. The fisherwomen interviewed shared lessons passed down by their ancestors on co-existence with the land and the sea in a sustainable manner.

"It's part of our culture and tradition to harvest resources from the rocks in front of our houses. I go down to the beach just near our houses and harvest at low tide. There are plenty of limpets – they keep growing as we harvest them. We don't take the very small ones. We learnt as children that we must only take the large ones so "ons haal net die grootes af". I use a knife to get them off the rocks. Then I scrape them out the shell with a spoon." – (Fisherwoman 5).

"We grew up knowing that we must only take the big limpets and leave the little ones to grow." (Fisherwoman 3).

Fisherwoman 8 began her journey in the fishing industry at the young age of 14. Her first experiences in the sector were shaped by the guidance of her grandmother, who would take her along to work and teach her the techniques needed to process fish. One of the skills she learned from her grandmother was how to dye hake to create haddock, a specialized method that involves treating the fish with a distinctive dye to achieve the colour and appearance associated with this product. As she grew older, Fisherwoman 8 took on more responsibilities and continued to build her experience in the industry. She went on to work at the crayfish factory in St Helena Bay, where she expanded her knowledge of seafood processing. Over the years, she also held roles in two additional fish factories, each providing her with new insights into different aspects of the fishing and processing industry.

Fisherwoman 8's career reflects the generational knowledge transfer that is so central to fishing communities. By learning from her grandmother and then applying those skills in modern factory settings, she has managed to bridge the gap between tradition and industry. Her early start and continued involvement in the fishing sector highlight the resilience and adaptability of women

in this community, as they find ways to preserve their heritage while navigating the demands of a changing industry.

"I started working when I was 14 years old. I first went with my grandmother to work, and she showed me what they do at the factory. She taught me and I helped to dye the fish to make haddock." (Fisherwoman 8).

According to the vast majority of women interviewed, the traditional knowledge passed down through generations is fundamental to preservation of the marine environment. An insightful example of how the intimate knowledge of local "*vlekkers"* allows them to predict the presence of snoek in their fishing grounds is how these skilled women assess the fish by examining the "*kuite*," or roe. The colour and thickness of the roe provide essential clues; when the roe is thick and deep red, it indicates that the snoek is preparing to spawn. This is a signal that the fish will soon release its eggs and migrate toward deeper waters, likely reducing its presence in the shallower areas where they are typically caught (Adams and Others vs Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy and Others, 2022).

Fisherwoman 6 explained that the sea lettuce used by Weskusmandjie to make their sea lettuce salt is carefully harvested from the shores of Steenberg's Cove. This particular variety of seaweed, which clings lightly to the rocks, is an essential ingredient in their product. However, she noted that over the past few months, the availability of sea lettuce has been worryingly low. This scarcity may be due to recent rough seas, which can easily dislodge the delicate sea lettuce from the rocks, making it difficult to find and collect.

This information might sound trivial, but it represents vital data being collected by fisherwomen in St Helena Bay. The observations made by these women about resources like sea lettuce offer real-time insights into changes in the local marine environment. These fisherwomen, who work closely with the ocean every day, are attuned to subtle shifts in ecosystem health—whether it's the availability of sea lettuce, fluctuations in fish populations, or changes in water quality. Their lived experiences and keen observations provide invaluable data that could otherwise go unrecorded.

For generations, small-scale fisherwomen have been the keepers of traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through oral history and hands-on experience. This knowledge is not

static; it evolves as these women adapt to changes in their environment, and their experiences serve as a bridge linking cultural heritage with contemporary practices in sustainable fishing.

5.3.7 Data collectors

Outside of snoek season, fishers in St Helena Bay primarily target Cape bream, which has increasingly become a significant part of the local catch during these months. Among those supporting this seasonal shift in fishing activities are several fisherwomen from Steenberg's Cove, who play a crucial role as part of the ABALOBI Quality Control team for the St Helena Bay region.

ABALOBI, the organisation behind this initiative, is a South African-based non-profit organisation with a global reach. It is dedicated to supporting and developing small-scale fishing communities through innovative approaches that emphasize equity, resilience, and sustainability. ABALOBI's programs are designed to empower communities like those in St Helena Bay by providing them with tools, training, and market access, ensuring that traditional fishing practices can continue to thrive in a rapidly changing industry.

Of the women interviewed, 3 are actively involved in Quality Control for ABALOBI, focused on maintaining the highest quality standards for fish processing and distribution, ensuring that the cold chain is preserved from the moment the fish is caught until it reaches the market. By doing so, they help guarantee the freshness and safety of the fish, enhancing its market value and ensuring compliance with quality regulations.

In practice, when fishers land their catches, these fisherwomen are the first to receive the fish at the dock. They meticulously inspect each batch, monitoring the temperature of the fish, handling practices, and overall condition of the fish. Their role is critical, as they ensure that the fish meets the stringent quality and safety standards required for sale, thus protecting both the consumers and the reputation of the region's fisheries. Their work directly supports the efforts of local fishers by providing them with access to markets that demand high-quality seafood, helping to sustain the community's livelihood through improved product standards.

In many ways, these women act as informal data collectors, documenting the effects of environmental changes due to factors like climate shifts and ocean conditions. This grassroots knowledge can inform sustainable harvesting practices, helping to balance their community's livelihood needs with the preservation of marine resources. By sharing their observations, these fisherwomen contribute to a better understanding of the environmental challenges facing small-scale fisheries and coastal ecosystems, reinforcing the importance of community-based

environmental monitoring. In this way, even what may seem like small observations become part of a larger picture that is essential for future conservation and sustainable management efforts in St Helena Bay and beyond.

5.4 Challenges experienced by fisherwomen in St Helena Bay

5.4.1 Economic hardships

Many of the fisherwomen interviewed consistently emphasized economic struggles and job insecurity as two of the most pressing challenges they face. While only a few of them earn an income from direct fishing activities, most rely on indirect, land-based roles such as net mending, small-scale trading, and fish processing. These positions, though integral to the fishing value chain, are often low-paying and lack basic job security. This reliance on precarious work means that many fisherwomen face significant financial instability, as their income is closely tied to the cyclical and unpredictable nature of the fishing industry. Fisherwoman 16 explained that families in the area rely on a combination of family support and social grants to manage their finances. She is retired and receives a government pension, which is often insufficient to cover all household expenses. One of her sons works as a crew member on a snoek boat. When the snoek is in season, they have a steady income, but during the off-season, they struggle financially.

> *"Some boats only focus on snoek because it is worth it, so when is not season they're not fishing"* (Fisherwoman 16).

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the precariousness of their livelihoods. Seasonal fluctuations, environmental changes, and market conditions all contribute to a volatile income stream, leaving fisherwomen vulnerable to the industry's ups and downs. Many of the jobs they hold are seasonal (net mending, snoek '*vlekkers'*), and even within peak seasons, their income depends on the availability of fish and the demand in local and regional markets. This inconsistency disrupts income stability, making it difficult for them to plan or build a financial safety net. This economic unpredictability is further compounded by the limited opportunities for full-time or permanent positions within the fishing sector.

Adding to this vulnerability is the fact that some of these women (35%) are the sole or primary breadwinners for their households (Figure 7). Fisherwoman 2 faces significant financial

strain as she relies on a pension for both herself and her late husband. In addition to managing her own expenses, she also supports a child struggling with drug addiction, which further adds to her financial and emotional burden.

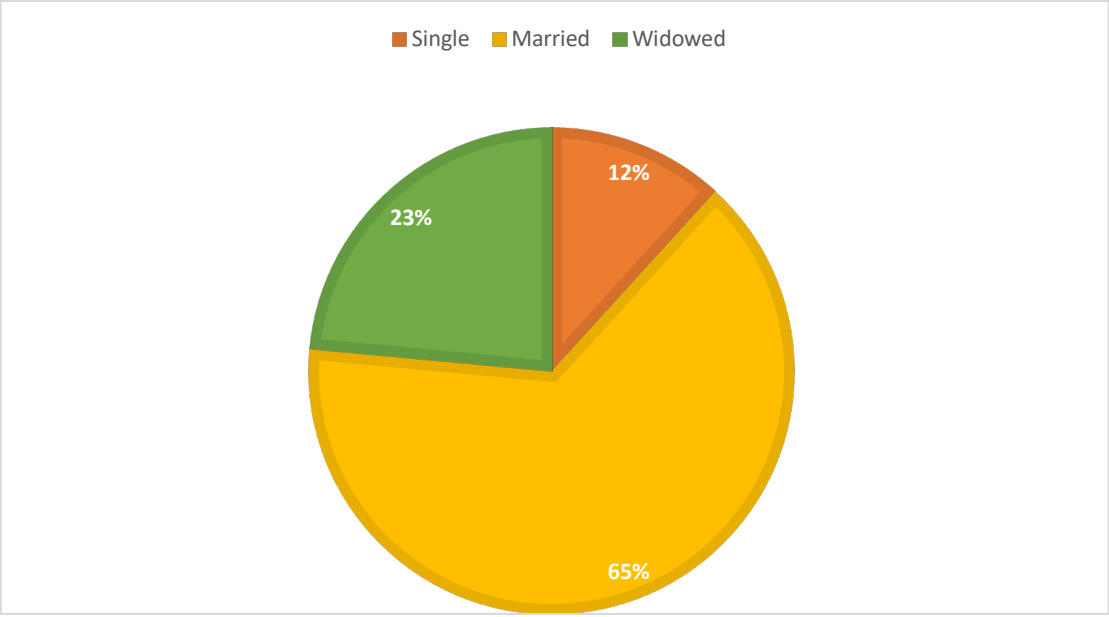

Figure 7. Marital status of respondents at the time of the interviews.

They carry the financial responsibility for supporting their children, elders, and often extended family members, which adds an additional layer of pressure to secure reliable work. For some of these fisherwomen, their income is essential not just for daily sustenance but for the survival and well-being of their families. Their position as primary earners underscore the urgent need for more stable and sustainable employment options, as well as social protection within the fishing industry. The resilience they display in the face of economic hardships is remarkable, yet their stories highlight a pressing need for industry reforms that could offer more support and stability to these vital contributors to the coastal economy.

5.4.2 Onerous permitting procedures

The lack of permits to legally harvest and sell mussels and limpets was raised by a few of the women interviewed and seen as a significant obstacle to progressing their livelihoods and providing for their families in St Helena Bay. Particularly in Steenberg's Cove, these women have repeatedly tried to obtain the necessary permits from DFFE, but their efforts have largely been met with bureaucratic roadblocks (Fisherwomen 3, 5, 6 and 14).

"*We applied for permits for seaweed and white mussel, but it was declined*"
(Fisherwoman 14)

Without permits, they are forced to operate outside the formal regulatory framework (using recreational permits), which restricts their access to broader markets and leaves them vulnerable to enforcement actions. This limitation not only impacts their income potential but also makes them heavily dependent on local organisations like ABALOBI to facilitate sales within a narrower, more controlled environment.

Despite these challenges, the recently concluded small-scale fisheries rights allocation process in 2024, allocated rights to several fisherwomen in St Helena Bay, and 10 of the 17 fisherwomen interviewed were granted fishing rights. These rights provide them with a degree of security, enabling them to operate without fear of fines from authorities for harvesting resources from shore. For these women, being granted small-scale fishing rights has opened doors to more stable sales opportunities, offering a glimpse of what could be possible if broader permit accessibility were achieved. Their success serves as a hopeful example and signals a potential pathway for positive change within the community.

A recurring issue faced by fishers in St Helena Bay, both men and women, is the complexity of the administrative forms required to apply for rights and obtain fishing permits as well as other official processes. Three of the fisherwomen interviewed mentioned that these forms are often lengthy, filled with technical jargon, and difficult to navigate, making them a challenge for many fishers who may not have extensive experience with bureaucratic documentation (Fisherwomen 6, 10 and 15). For fisherwomen, this barrier is particularly daunting, as many report struggling to interpret the forms and complete them accurately, which ultimately diminishes their chances of securing the necessary rights, permits and approvals.

5.4.3 Conflict in communities

Community dynamics and social exclusion, particularly in close-knit areas like Steenberg's Cove, create significant barriers for outsiders trying to integrate into the local fishing community. In these communities, fishing is not just an occupation, but a way of life deeply rooted in family traditions and generations of shared knowledge. This strong cultural identity can make it challenging for newcomers, especially those without family ties to fishing, to be fully accepted.

The experience of Fisherwoman 7 exemplifies these difficulties. Originally from Cape Town and not part of a family with a fishing background, she entered the community with hopes of contributing to the industry. Despite her three years of relevant work experience, she found herself facing a range of social challenges.

Fisherwoman 7 reports feeling excluded and often treated as an outsider by the established fisherfolk. Her lack of generational ties to the fishing community made it difficult for her to be seen as a "true" member, despite her dedication to the work. Social acceptance within Steenberg's Cove's fishing circles often depends on a shared history and a familial connection to the trade, both of which Fisherwoman 7 lacks. This exclusion has impacted her ability to fully participate and advance within the community, as informal networks and social connections play a key role in accessing opportunities and support.

Conflict takes on many shapes and forms, and for Fisherwoman 2, it is a daily reality that she faces within her own home. She bears the weight of being the sole caregiver for her son, who is struggling with drug addiction. This responsibility is a complex and challenging one, requiring her to balance his well-being with the needs of her other children. The emotional toll is significant, as she must navigate the unpredictable and often tumultuous dynamics that come with supporting a loved one through addiction. Each day brings new challenges, from managing emotional crises to finding the resources and support that might help her son on his journey to recovery, all while maintaining a semblance of normalcy for her other children.

With the establishment of Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) cooperatives, new challenges and conflicts among members have emerged. While cooperatives offer a promising model for shared economic benefits and community empowerment, they are not without internal issues, particularly regarding governance and financial transparency. Fisherwoman 13 has voiced strong dissatisfaction with her co-op, expressing concerns about the lack of openness regarding the handling of funds. According to her, the cooperative's "directors" have not been transparent about the loans taken out and how the money is being allocated and spent.

This lack of financial accountability has created a sense of mistrust among some members, who feel that they are left in the dark about decisions that directly impact their livelihoods. Fisherwoman 13 worries that without clear communication and transparency from leadership, the cooperative's objectives of community upliftment and shared prosperity are being undermined. For her the cooperative was meant to be a platform for collective progress, but the current issues have led to frustration and division.

5.4.4 No social protection

The lack of social protection for fisherwomen contributes significantly to financial instability within their households, making it difficult for families to afford basic needs such as food, transportation, and other necessities, especially during off-seasons when work is scarce. This absence of a safety net also restricts their access to essential services like education and healthcare, both for themselves and their children. In times of emergencies—such as illness, injury, or periods of unemployment—these gaps in social support become particularly acute, leaving fisherwomen and their families vulnerable. Five of the fisherwomen interviewed mentioned having to leave school before graduating to work and support their families financially, further limiting their opportunities for economic advancement (Fisherwomen 1, 2, 3, 8 and 11).

Fisherwoman 10 said that fishers are often excluded from formal relief efforts, such as government-issued unemployment benefits, disaster relief funds, and food aid programs, which has a direct impact on their income and overall well-being. During times of hardship, such as when fish stocks are low or environmental conditions prevent fishing, they frequently lack access to these forms of assistance or recognition. This exclusion from relief programs results in financial and food insecurity, as fisherwomen typically work on a day-to-day basis without the ability to save for leaner times. To add to this, over half of the respondents are retired, depending mainly on their government pension to support them financially. The seasonal nature of their work, combined with the lack of social support, means they are often unable to accumulate savings, leaving them in a precarious situation where covering even basic needs becomes a struggle.

5.4.5 Limited support from government

A key issue raised by the majority of women respondents was the limited support provided by government. This lack of support has a profound impact on fisherwomen in St Helena Bay, affecting every aspect of their livelihoods and contributing to an ongoing cycle of vulnerability and economic instability. According to all the women interviewed, one of the most significant challenges is their limited access to fishing rights, which restricts their ability to legally harvest intertidal resources and benefit from the resources in their own communities. However, since his research has been completed, 10 of the fisherwomen interviewed have been successful in their applications for fishing rights.

Securing these rights marks a significant achievement, as it provides these women with the legal framework to operate within the fishing industry and access intertidal marine resources that are crucial for their livelihoods. However, despite this legal recognition, many women raised the issue of the limited diversity of species and the small quantity of the resources available to them within their basket. Many fisherwomen rely almost exclusively on these intertidal marine resources, such as mussels, seaweed, and limpets, which are often insufficient to sustain a stable income or meet the broader needs of their families. While securing rights is an important step forward, the narrow scope of resources available highlights the ongoing challenges in achieving true economic empowerment and stability for these women within the fishing sector.

One of the more recent challenges faced by fisherwomen in St Helena Bay arises from changes in permit conditions that restrict their ability to harvest marine resources close to home. In the past, their mothers and grandmothers had the freedom to gather seaweed, mussels, and other marine resources directly from the shores near their communities, ensuring both a steady supply of raw materials and a strong connection to the local environment. However, fisherwomen 3, 5, and 6 now find themselves forced to travel to nearby towns, such as Velddrif, to purchase seaweed directly from factories. This shift has been necessitated by new permit restrictions, which no longer allow them to harvest certain resources within their local areas.

Fisherwomen 3 and 6 explained how these changes have introduced new challenges, not only adding financial strain due to the costs of travel and purchasing materials but also disrupting long-standing traditions. For generations, these women and their families sustained themselves through direct access to the ocean's resources, embedding a deep cultural and spiritual connection to the sea within their community’s heritage. Having to buy resources that were once freely available distances them from these traditional practices, creating a sense of loss and disconnect from their cultural identity as gatherers and custodians of the sea.

All women raised the lack of support from the Department in different aspects of the value chain, either in the limited guidance provided to complete the many forms to obtain fishing rights and permits, or in managing their co-operatives and in the lack of resources to assist fishers in all these tasks, as a significant factor hindering their full participation in the fisheries sector. Without access to clear instructions or assistance, fisherwomen are left to navigate these forms and procedures on their own, often resulting in errors or incomplete submissions. This situation frequently leads to rejections and necessitates appeals, creating a frustrating and time-consuming cycle that further delays their ability to operate legally and access broader market opportunities.

In the Discussion chapter, these findings will be examined within a wider socio-economic and structural framework to investigate how the institutional, cultural, and economic dynamics in St Helena Bay both facilitate and hinder fisherwomen's roles and livelihoods. This analysis will also emphasize structural constraints, including restricted access to resources, policy exclusion, and socio-cultural norms, which influence the lived experiences of women in the small-scale fisheries sector. The discussion will delineate strategies for achieving gender equity, emphasizing interventions aimed at augmenting women's participation, leadership, and economic prospects within the industry.

6. Discussion: Towards Gender Equity in Small-scale fisheries

6.1 Introduction

From harvesting to processing, marketing, and household financial management, women are indispensable to the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector worldwide (FAO *et al.,* 2023). Notwithstanding their important social and economic contributions, gender inequalities continue, which results in systematic undervaluation of women's labour in the fisheries industry (Sowman *et al*., 2014; Kleiber *et al.,* 2015). Women's capacity to influence fisheries policies, resource access, and fair benefits from development initiatives is limited due to their exclusion from decision-making processes (FAO, 2015a). This exclusion undermines their financial autonomy and diminishes their negotiating power within families and communities, hence perpetuating gender disparities on various levels.

Structural barriers hindering women's full participation in the SSF sector arise from gender-neutral policies and regulatory frameworks that neglect to tackle gender inequalities in resource access and market engagement. Research indicates that using gender-sensitive strategies in fisheries management might improve women's participation in governance, expand economic prospects, and foster sustainable resource utilisation (Westermann *et al.*, 2005; Harper *et al.,* 2013; de la Torre-Castro, 2019; Oloko *et al*., 2025). Mitigating these disparities necessitates focused actions that acknowledge women's achievements, provide their social security, and guarantee equitable involvement in policy-making processes.

Even with the progress made within the SSF sector and the increasing visibility of women's roles, gender inequalities remain entrenched. Women continue to face barriers to accessing resources, securing investment, and navigating interactions with governmental bodies, which further perpetuates the cycle of marginalisation. For real progress to occur, there is a need to address these gendered barriers by implementing policies that acknowledge and value women's contributions, and foster women's leadership and representation in decision-making processes. Only through these changes can the SSF sector fully harness the potential of its female workforce, fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and resilient future for coastal communities.

The overall aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the critical, yet often overlooked roles that fisherwomen in three fishing communities in St Helena Bay play in the local

fishing industry and their communities, as well as the challenges they face in achieving recognition and full participation in the sector. The study also examined the extent to which the new policy and legal framework for SSFs in South Africa have enhanced their recognition and supported their greater involvement in the sector. Through interviews, observations, and analyses, this study sought to uncover the varied responsibilities these women shoulder, both within the fishing value chain, in their households and in the community, to highlight the obstacles they face in their daily lives and consider possible pathways for improving gender equity in the sector.

The findings from this research provides important insights into the diverse roles and contributions of small-scale fisherwomen in communities in St Helena Bay. These women not only participate in fishing activities but also take on critical responsibilities in household management, community development, and the preservation of cultural practices. Their contributions to the fishery value chain goes above and beyond harvesting and production. Fisherwomen are involved in every stage of the value chain, from hook to cook, from pre-harvest preparations to post-harvest processing, marketing and distribution. Furthermore, fisherwomen are the caregivers, the community organisers, the knowledge holders, and the cultural custodians who sustain and nurture the social fabric of their fishing communities. Some women also play important leadership roles and contribute to management and policy forums.

This chapter will discuss the findings of this research in relation to the international literature on the roles of women in the SSFs sector and then explore potential approaches for enhancing gender equity in small-scale fisheries, from improving access to resources and enhancing training opportunities to fostering greater inclusivity in decision-making processes. By situating the experiences of St Helena Bay's fisherwomen within wider discussions on gender and small-scale fisheries, this chapter aims to offer insights into creating a more equitable and sustainable future for these resilient women and their communities.

6.2 Women's invisible contributions to the fishery value chain

The findings of this research highlight the diverse and vital roles played by fisherwomen in the fisheries sector in in St Helena Bay, reinforcing much of what has been established in broader academic literature regarding gender dynamics and roles in small-scale fisheries (Kleiber *et al.,* 2015; Harper *et al.,* 2017; FAO *et al.,* 2023). Fisherwomen in the communities of Laingville, Steenberg's Cove and Stompneus Bay are deeply embedded in the fishing industry, often from birth, inheriting traditional knowledge and skills passed down through generations. Their work

extends across the entire fisheries value chain, including pre-harvesting activities, harvesting intertidal resources, processing, and marketing. Other roles include caregiving, household provisioning and financial management in the household. These findings align with global studies that emphasize how women, despite being less visible in official fisheries data, make significant economic and social contributions to the small-scale fisheries sector (Béné *et al.,* 2016; Cele, 2020; FAO, 2022).

Gendered division of labour in the fishing sector comes up as a major recurring theme from the interviews. Women still play vital roles in pre- and post-harvest operations including processing, net mending, and seafood preservation—tasks that are often undervalued in fisheries policy and governance systems (Harper *et al.,* 2013; de la Torre-Castro *et al*., 2017; Frangoudes & Gerrard, 2018). This supports the general body of research that shows how men's activities in harvesting usually take front stage in fisheries governance systems, therefore neglecting the contributions of women (Sowman *et al*., 2014; Kleiber *et al*., 2019). Similar to other coastal fishing communities throughout the world, St Helena Bay's fisherwomen also face institutional obstacles including limited access to fishing permits, training programs, and decision-making processes (FAO, 2015; Raemaekers *et al.,* 2016). These limitations not only impede their economic empowerment but also support their historical marginalisation in the sector.

The interviews also exposed the important role fisherwomen play as community leaders and caregivers, actively contributing to the social and economic support systems in their communities. This is consistent with research showing that women's roles in fisheries typically go beyond just economic contributions to include food security, caregiving, and advocacy (Sunde, 2010; Fonto, 2021). Many St Helena Bay fisherwomen assume leadership roles in local cooperatives and market venues, therefore promoting efforts to ensure fair working conditions and equitable resource distribution. Studies of women engaged in policymaking and fisheries management have found that management strategies are sometimes more inclusive and sustainable when women are included (Westermann *et al*., 2005; Gätke, 2008). Despite their essential contributions, fisherwomen in this study expressed concerns about the lack of institutional support for their work—a topic well-documented in other studies on gender equity in fisheries (Masifundise, 2008; Sunde, 2010).

Like many other studies on women in fisheries (Letisco and Lee, 2014; Calhoun *et al.,* 2016; Harper, 2019; Sultana *et al.,* 2019) the issue of multiple roles that women must take on is evident in the case of St Helena Bay. Fisherwomen’s role as caregivers adds another layer of

responsibility to their already demanding lives. The women of St Helena Bay are often the cornerstone of their households, managing a wide range of tasks to ensure the stability and well-being of their families. They take on the critical responsibilities of budgeting, cooking, child-rearing, and caring for elders, all while navigating the economic uncertainties that come with their work.

Beyond their roles within their households, fisherwomen in St Helena Bay also emerge as vital leaders within their communities, taking on responsibilities that extend far beyond harvesting and processing. Like women in many coastal communities all over the world, they advocate tirelessly for the well-being of their families and neighbours, stepping into leadership roles that are both challenging and essential (Alonso-Población and Siar, 2018; Rohe *et al*., 2018; Galappaththi *et al*., 2022). They often act as mediators between the fishing community and local authorities, ensuring that the voices of small-scale fishers are heard, and their needs are addressed.

Furthermore, the research underscores the impact of environmental changes on fisherwomen's livelihoods. As in other small-scale fishing communities, climate change, pollution, and overfishing are affecting marine resource availability, disproportionately impacting women who rely on nearshore harvesting and shore-based fishing-related activities (Cochrane *et al.*, 2009; Jarre *et al*., 2015; Deeg, 2023). Similar to studies elsewhere, the St Helena Bay fisherwomen have a deep understanding of their environment and have observed environmental and climate changes that affect their traditional SSFs (Sunde *et al.,* 2024). Fisherwomen's deep ecological knowledge and ability to act as informal data collectors positions them as valuable contributors to sustainable fisheries management, yet their insights remain largely unrecognized in formal governance structures (Harper *et al.,* 2013; Kleiber *et al*., 2015). Their work on the shores and in the factories allows them to witness fluctuations in species populations, shifts in migratory patterns, and changes in water quality—data points that are crucial for understanding the health of marine ecosystems. This knowledge was evident in the St Helena Bay Study. Even without formal training, fisherwomen often develop a keen observational awareness and an intuitive understanding of the environment, skills honed over years of direct experience with the rhythms of the sea. Their insights could be very important for guiding community-based conservation efforts and guiding adaptive measures to address environmental problems. Recognising and formalising this role helps the sector not only improve its capacity for accurate data collecting but also empower fisherwomen to actively help to preserve the natural resources they depend on.

The resilience and adaptability of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay are evident. Their continued participation in both informal and formalized markets, through initiatives such as the Weskusmandjie collective and ABALOBI, reflects broader trends in the global small-scale fisheries sector, where women are finding creative ways to sustain their livelihoods despite economic and policy-related barriers (Isaacs, 2013; FAO, 2022). Their participation in local and regional markets, combined with their role as custodians of traditional ecological knowledge, highlights their essential contributions to both food security and cultural heritage preservation.

The findings of this research also highlight factors hindering women's full participation in the fisheries value chain, including economic struggles, lack of access to permits, no social protection, structural discrimination, and minimal decision-making power (Weeratunge *et al*., 2010; Fröcklin *et al*., 2013; Lentisco and Lee, 2015; Béné *et al.,* 2015; Alonso-Población and Siar, 2018; Cele, 2020).

Current permitting conditions in South Africa fail to consider the nature of women's work in the fishery sector, resulting in policies that hinder rather than support their livelihoods. Permits are typically area-specific, meaning that women who are granted fishing rights and valid permits to harvest intertidal marine resources are often assigned to areas far from their communities. This geographical mismatch creates significant challenges for fisherwomen, as they must contend with the logistical and financial burdens of traveling long distances to unfamiliar harvesting zones. For many women in St Helena Bay, the cost of transportation, coupled with the time required to travel, outweighs the potential benefits of utilising these permits, rendering them effectively unusable.

This disconnect between permitting practices and the realities of fisherwomen's lives means that, despite holding valid permits, some women in St Helena Bay are unable to engage in harvesting activities and therefore do not reap the economic or social benefits these rights are intended to provide. Instead of empowering these women, the current system perpetuates their exclusion from the sector and exacerbates their financial vulnerability.

This indicates a more general conflict between the lived reality of small-scale fishers dependent on intertidal resources and environmental regulations aimed at conservation (Béné *et al.,* 2015). Unquestionably, sustainable management of marine ecosystems is important, but policies that ignore traditional knowledge and practices run the danger of alienating the very people who have traditionally looked after them. For St Helena Bay's fisherwomen, these limitations emphasize the critical need of a more inclusive approach to policymaking that not only

acknowledges their traditional knowledge but also offers them the tools and pathways to maintain their livelihoods.

Moreover, the lack of representation of women in planning processes and lack of consultation on decisions that affect their lives deprives fisherwomen of opportunities to advocate for fair and equitable resource allocation (Calhoun *et al*., 2016; Harper *et al.,* 2017; Alonso-Población and Siar, 2018; Galappaththi *et al*., 2022). Many fisherwomen in St Helena Bay have struggled to acquire fishing rights, access essential training, and financial resources that could allow them to diversify their livelihoods and stabilize their incomes. Without this support, they are left vulnerable to economic instability, further exacerbating the challenges faced by their households and communities. The absence of targeted capacity-building initiatives, such as leadership training or technical skills development, limits their ability to participate meaningfully in governance and decision-making structures.

What is particularly striking, and perhaps ironic, is that despite their own vulnerable positions within the community these fisherwomen continue to serve as pillars of support for others. Their dedication to caring for those around them highlights their resilience and compassion, yet it also underscores a stark imbalance: while they are relied upon to provide care, there is often no one to look after them. Their vulnerability goes largely unaddressed, as the social and institutional support they extend to others is seldom reciprocated. This lack of support is further compounded by the absence of social protection systems, leaving them without a safety net when they themselves need assistance. The lack of formal social protection for fisherwomen, including their exclusion from government relief programs, limited access to pensions and healthcare, is a global issue (Westermann *et al.*, 2005; Masifundise 2008; Béné *et al.,* 2015; FAO, 2015) that has been directly addressed in the SSF Guidelines (2015), compelling states to "promote social security protection for workers in small-scale fisheries. They should take into account the characteristics of small-scale fisheries and apply security schemes to the entire value chain" (FAO, 2015a, p.8).

These factors hinder fisherwomen's ability to fully participate in and benefit from the fishing sector, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that recognise and address the unique circumstances faced by women in this industry. This research's findings reinforce the argument that small-scale fisheries cannot be effectively managed or understood without considering gender. Recognising and integrating women's roles in fisheries governance is not only

a matter of social justice but also a critical step toward more equitable and sustainable fisheries management (FAO, 2015a; Kleiber *et al.,* 2019; FAO *et al.,* 2023).

6.3 Pathways to Gender Equity in SSF

6.3.1 Introduction

This study not only looks at the current situation of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay but also offers recommendations for bridging the gap between their contributions to the small-scale fisheries sector and their absence from management and decision-making procedures. By identifying the specific factors that hinder their full participation—such as the lack of gender-disaggregated data, limited access to nutritional and livelihood benefits of small-scale fisheries, and limited representation in fisheries governance and decision-making—this study provides insights that could inform policy reforms and other initiatives that would enhance their participation and promote gender equity in the sector. These recommendations emphasize the importance of acknowledging and integrating women's voices into management processes, thereby promoting a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future for small-scale fisheries in South Africa. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for systemic changes that recognise and support the critical roles of fisherwomen, not only for their empowerment but also for the resilience and sustainability of coastal communities and improved fisheries management.

The suggested pathways to gender equity proposed in this study align closely with the SSF Guidelines (FAO, 2015a**)** and the Illuminating Hidden Harvests report (FAO *et al.,* 2023)**,** reinforcing the urgency of addressing gender disparities in the fisheries sector. These international frameworks emphasize the need for gender-sensitive policies, inclusive governance, and improved socio-economic conditions for fisherwomen—all of which are crucial for bridging the existing gaps in small-scale fisheries. By drawing on these global recommendations and applying them to the local context of St Helena Bay, this study highlights the importance of integrating fisherwomen into decision-making processes, enhancing their access to marine resources, and recognising their contributions beyond their roles in pre- and post-harvest. Ultimately, these insights serve as a foundation for policy reforms, institutional support, and targeted interventions that would not only empower women in fisheries but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and resilience of coastal communities.

6.3.2 Governance reforms

While the new SSF policy in South Africa provides greater access to fishing rights for women fishers, this is only a starting point. Decades of marginalisation, systemic exclusion, and unequal access to resources have left fisherwomen at a significant disadvantage, requiring more tailored support to address these historic inequities. Moreover, women in small-scale fisheries are disproportionately impacted by climate change, economic instability, and social challenges, which exacerbate their vulnerabilities (Deeg, 2023; Oloko *et al.,* 2024). Achieving true equity demands policies and interventions that go beyond providing equal rights, focusing instead on empowering women through targeted resources, capacity-building initiatives, and platforms that amplify their voices in decision-making processes. Only by addressing these structural and contextual disparities can we ensure that women in fisheries are not just included but truly empowered to thrive.

If women's identities and practices are always being compared to those of men, their unique experiences, contributions, and challenges in the fishing sector are not adequately understood "in their own right" (Gustavsson, 2020). Such comparisons risk perpetuating a male-centric framework that fails to acknowledge the distinct roles and perspectives women bring to the fisheries sector. Women's lives in fishing are shaped by a range of social, cultural, and economic factors that differ significantly from those of their male counterparts. By focusing solely on how women's contributions align or differ from men's, the nuanced and multifaceted nature of their involvement is overshadowed. To truly understand and support women in fisheries, it is essential to examine their lives and practices independently, valuing their unique knowledge systems, labour, and resilience without comparison to male norms (Williams, 2008). This approach is key to addressing systemic inequities and fostering a more inclusive understanding of the fisheries sector.

Governments must adopt and implement gender-responsive policies that not only recognise but actively address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in small-scale fisheries (SSF). These policies should acknowledge women's vital contributions to the fisheries value chain, from harvesting and processing to marketing and community leadership. Reforms should focus on ensuring equitable access to critical resources, including fishing rights, credit, training opportunities, and platforms for meaningful participation in decision-making processes (Weeratunge *et al.,* 2010; FAO, 2017). Access to fishing rights is particularly crucial, as women are often excluded from resource allocation systems that favour male-dominated practices (Bennett, 2005).

Incorporating these reforms into fisheries management and ensuring women are better represented on management and policy working groups and task teams, can help dismantle the structural barriers that hinder women's full participation, ensuring that they are not only included but empowered within the sector. Governments can build a more fair, resilient, and sustainable fisheries industry where the opinions and contributions of women are appreciated and supported by encouraging inclusivity. Such policies are essential not only for advancing gender equity but also for achieving broader social and economic development goals within coastal communities.

Advancement of gender equity in the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector depends equally on strengthening social protection systems. For women, who are generally hired informally and lack access to fundamental labour rights, this involves formalising employment contracts to ensure fair salaries and safe working conditions (Weeratunge *et al.,* 2010). Reducing the combined strain of professional and household obligations disproportionately affecting women in fishing communities depends on access to basic services including healthcare and childcare (Béné *et al*., 2016). Additionally, establishing and implementing labour standards that safeguard women's rights can also help to create a basis for their economic empowerment and defence against abuse (Williams, 2008).

6.3.3 Training and Capacity Building

Capacity-building initiatives tailored specifically to women, such as the workshops offered by CPUT in St Helena Bay, enable women to market their products to acceptable standards, and are essential for enhancing their skills and enabling them to transition into higher-value activities and leadership roles within the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector. Such initiatives should prioritise training programs that focus on financial literacy, equipping women with the ability to manage finances effectively, secure funding, and navigate complex market dynamics (Williams, 2008). Entrepreneurial skills are equally important, as they empower women to diversify their income streams, develop sustainable business models, and take advantage of emerging economic opportunities (Harper *et al.*, 2017).

Beyond individual capacity-building, fostering partnerships between governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector actors, and local communities is crucial to creating an ecosystem of support for women's empowerment. Governments can implement policies that promote access to resources, credit, and infrastructure, while NGOs can provide technical expertise, mentorship programs, and advocacy platforms. Local communities, on the

other hand, can play a pivotal role in fostering social acceptance of women's participation in leadership roles and high-value activities (D'Souza, 2020; Williams, 2019). While fisherwomen in St Helena Bay communities have developed strong partnerships with various NGOs, their access to and relationships with government and the private sector needs strengthening. Improved channels of communication to government that enable women's needs and priorities to be articulated is required. Building relationships with private sector actors including managers in the fishing industry will enable better understanding of their important roles and the challenges they face and open up opportunities to address these challenges.

By combining training programs with systemic support, these capacity-building efforts can not only empower women economically but also position them as influential stakeholders in the SSF sector. Over time, this holistic approach can drive transformative change, enabling women to lead, innovate, and contribute more fully to the sustainable development of fisheries and their communities.

6.3.4 Research

Although some fisherwomen have been granted fishing rights, they experience significantly lower access to fishing permits compared to men. Their seasonal and erratic employment prospects aggravate economic uncertainty even further. Many women are relegated to supportive, household-based roles instead of being recognised as independent fishers, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour. Fisherwomen are also highly underrepresented in leadership roles within fishing cooperatives, limiting their influence in decision-making processes.

There is a persistent gender data gap in fisheries because, like many other sectors, it is trapped in a gender-blind feedback cycle that reinforces the production and perpetuation of sexist data (Deeg, 2023). This cycle begins with the systematic exclusion of women's contributions from data collection processes and methodologies, often because their roles are deemed less significant or invisible within traditional frameworks (Kleiber *et al.,* 2015). As a result, fisheries data and research tend to focus disproportionately on men's activities, further entrenching the assumption that women's contributions are marginal or irrelevant (Harper *et al.,* 2017).

This lack of gender-disaggregated and inclusive data exacerbates the marginalisation of women in fisheries, as their roles remain unrecognized and undervalued in policymaking and development initiatives. By overlooking women's contributions, this feedback loop presents a skewed and limited understanding of the true value of small-scale fisheries (SSF) to economies,

food security, nutrition, and sustainable development (FAO *et al*., 2023). Women's critical roles in post-harvest processing, trade, and community leadership are often left out of national statistics and global assessments, resulting in policies that fail to address their needs or support their empowerment (Bennett, 2005).

Addressing this gender data gap requires intentional efforts to break the feedback cycle. Governments, researchers, and organisations must prioritise the collection of gender-disaggregated data that captures the full spectrum of activities and contributions made by women in fisheries (FAO *et al*., 2023). Inclusive data collection methodologies should be designed to uncover the nuanced realities of women's work, recognising their roles in both formal and informal sectors (Williams, 2008). This will not only provide a more accurate and holistic picture of the SSF sector but also enable evidence-based decision-making that promotes gender equity and sustainability. Involving local women in the design and administration of local surveys in fishing communities would assist in identifying the specific roles of women in SSF sector and issues of importance to them.

Gender disaggregation should be regarded as the baseline requirement for all monitoring and research initiatives that inform fisheries policies and programs. The absence of gender-specific data or the use of biased data collection methodologies often marginalises or entirely overlooks the critical roles women play in fisheries. This not only obscures their contributions but also perpetuates a distorted understanding of the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector as a whole. Without accurate and inclusive data, the ability to measure the true impact of SSF on sustainable development goals (SDGs) is severely compromised. Additionally, such oversight hinders efforts to implement gender-responsive fisheries policies and practices, which are vital for achieving equity and sustainability within the sector.

As emphasized by the SSF Guidelines (FAO, 2015a), incorporating a gender lens into data collection is essential to recognise and amplify the voices and contributions of women in fisheries. By prioritising gender-disaggregated data, policymakers and practitioners can identify and address systemic disparities, ensure that women's needs and perspectives are integrated into fisheries governance, and unlock the full potential of small-scale fisheries in advancing social, economic, and environmental goals. Achieving this requires not only a commitment to disaggregated data collection but also the development of methodologies that are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of the lived realities of women in fisheries.

Research on women in fishing has extensively documented the multiple reproductive roles that women play, such as caregiving, household management, and community support, which are critical to the sustenance of fishing households and communities. However, this research has often fallen short of critically analysing the implications of women's evolving roles and contributions to fishing on their own lives. These changes raise important questions about how women perceive themselves within the sector, how their identities are shaped by shifting responsibilities, and what these transformations mean for their sense of empowerment, agency, and well-being.

Furthermore, as women take on new and expanded roles in fishing, the renegotiation of gender relations becomes a central issue. These evolving practices and responsibilities can challenge traditional gender norms and hierarchies, leading to shifts in power dynamics within households, workplaces, and communities. At the same time, these changes can result in tensions or resistance as entrenched roles and identities are reshaped. Gustavsson (2020:36) highlights the need to delve deeper into these dynamics, focusing on how gender relations and identities are actively (re)negotiated and (re)shaped in response to these changing roles and practices.

By understanding how women navigate and adapt to these shifts, research can provide insights into the broader implications for gender equity, social cohesion, and sustainability within the small-scale fisheries sector. This requires moving beyond a descriptive focus on women's reproductive roles to a more nuanced analysis of how these changes impact their lived experiences, aspirations, and socio-economic positioning within their communities. Only by addressing these complexities can we develop more inclusive policies and interventions that truly reflect the realities of women in fishing.

By closing the gender data gap, the contributions of women in fisheries can be fully acknowledged, empowering them to claim their rightful place as key stakeholders in shaping the future of the sector. This shift is essential for achieving inclusive and equitable development goals that benefit all members of fishing communities.

6.4 Role of NGOs in building resilience

Gender inclusiveness in fisheries governance has been outspokenly advocated by ICSF, an international network defending the rights of small-scale fishers. In Africa, ICSF has been particularly successful in drawing attention to women's contributions to the field and advocate gender-responsive legislation (ICSF, 2020; FAO, 2023).

By removing structural obstacles, promoting community resilience, and advocating fair resource management (Alonso-Población and Siar. 2018; D'Souza, 2020), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a pivotal role in empowering small-scale fishing communities. Many times, these organisations serve as intermediaries between official government structures and marginalised groups, offering vital support in the form of resources, capacity building, and education. For small-scale fisherwomen seeking sustainable livelihoods, justice, and acknowledgment, NGOs often act as allies. Working with local communities, NGOs can help implement ideas that solve both environmental preservation and socioeconomic empowerment, amplifying the voices of fisherwomen and highlighting their contributions to the sector.

The partnership between ABALOBI and the fisherwomen of St Helena Bay is a prime example of how NGOs can drive meaningful change in small-scale fishing communities. This collaboration reflects a shared commitment to sustainable fisheries management, community upliftment, and the promotion of high-quality, locally sourced seafood. ABALOBI, through its innovative technology platforms and community-driven initiatives, empowers fisherwomen to take greater control over their livelihoods by providing tools for direct market access, financial management, and transparent pricing mechanisms (Raemaekers *et al.*, 2016; ABALOBI website).

Another useful example is the role played by Blue Ventures, an NGO active in the SSFs space in Madagascar. This NGO promotes women as leaders through their fisherwomen leadership programme in the country, increasing women's participation in the management of coastal resources in local communities. Their work in Madagascar also includes helping fisherwomen develop alternative income sources, such as seaweed farming and eco-tourism, ensuring financial security during the octopus fishery closure (Lau & Ruano-Chamorro, 2021).

Through partnerships like these, NGOs demonstrate the transformative impact they can have in building resilience and empowerment within small-scale fishing communities (ICSF, 2020; Lau & Ruano-Chamorro, 2021). By addressing both immediate needs and systemic challenges, they create pathways for fisherwomen to thrive as leaders, entrepreneurs, and environmental stewards, contributing to the long-term resilience of coastal communities and marine ecosystems alike.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the study's findings on women fishers in St Helena Bay are considered in relation to international literature. Overall, these findings align with global research, highlighting

the invisibility of women's work and their contributions to the fisheries value chain. However, despite policy and legal reforms, the legacy of apartheid and persistent structural inequalities in South Africa continue to marginalise fisherwomen. As a result, they must fight particularly hard to have their voices heard, their work recognised, and their roles valued and integrated into fisheries governance.

This chapter also provided recommendations for enhancing gender equity in the fisheries sector, addressing governance and research dimensions as well as the critical role of NGOs, in line with the *Illuminating Hidden Harvests* (FAO *et al.,* 2023) report, emphasizing the need for gender-disaggregated data and policy reforms that recognise women's contributions. It highlighted the need for gender-responsive policies that support the roles of fisherwomen, ensuring their participation in decision-making processes, as advocated by the SSF Guidelines (2015), which call for securing women's rights, enhancing access to resources, and fostering equitable governance in small-scale fisheries.

7. Conclusion and Final Reflections

7.1 Introduction

This research aimed to explore the diverse roles and contributions of women across all facets of the South African small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector value chain. It sought to uncover the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape and influence these roles. Through a qualitative research approach, this study has demonstrated that women in SSF are not only involved in post-harvest activities, as is commonly perceived, but also play crucial roles across all aspects of the value chain. They contribute as harvesters, processors, traders, community leaders, knowledge holders, custodians of marine resources, caregivers and data collectors, yet their contributions often remain overlooked and undervalued in both policy and practice.

The findings highlight that women in SSF face multiple systemic challenges, including social and economic marginalisation, limited access to resources, lack of recognition in policy frameworks, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Despite these barriers, fisherwomen continue to assert their agency, demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and leadership within their communities. The research also underscores the intersectionality of gender, economic pressures, and environmental sustainability, revealing how these factors collectively shape the experiences and opportunities available to women in fisheries.

One of the most critical insights from this study is that the traditional fisheries value chain framework does not adequately capture the breadth of women's contributions. Their roles extend far beyond direct engagement in fishing and seafood processing to encompass caregiving responsibilities, informal trade, local governance, advocacy for sustainable resource management, and cultural transmission of traditional fishing knowledge. By broadening the definition of the fisheries value chain to include these non-traditional roles, this study contributes to a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the SSF sector.

Despite the numerous challenges they face, fisherwomen from St Helena Bay have demonstrated remarkable resilience, unwavering determination, and extraordinary grit in their efforts to transform their lives and uplift their communities. Historically marginalised in the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector, these women have navigated systemic barriers—including economic exclusion, limited access to resources, and exclusion from policy decisions—yet they continue to assert their agency and redefine their roles within the industry

Through their resourcefulness and resilience, fisherwomen have created supplemental and alternative livelihoods, built support networks, and engaged in cooperative initiatives that enhance economic stability for their families and communities. They have actively participated in knowledge-sharing, conservation efforts, and local governance, demonstrating their indispensable role in sustaining both marine ecosystems and the socio-economic fabric of coastal communities. Their willpower to secure better opportunities, challenge gender norms, and ensure sustainable livelihoods for future generations is inspiring and stands as a testament to their enduring commitment to change and progress.

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The resilience and contributions of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay highlight the urgent need for inclusive governance, equitable policies, and targeted support systems that recognise and empower them as key actors in the fisheries sector. By linking the experiences of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay to the broader body of research, this study underscores the urgent need for policy and strategic interventions that recognise and support women's participation in the fisheries sector, ensuring that their voices are included in shaping the future of small-scale fisheries in South Africa and their contributions to the sector is valued.

7.2 Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this research have important implications for policy and practice in the SSF sector in South Africa. First, there is a need to develop gender-responsive fisheries policies that explicitly recognise and support women's contributions at all levels of the value chain. Presently, fisheries management and governance structures largely overlook gender-specific challenges, thus perpetuating the systemic exclusion of women from resources, financial assistance, and leadership positions. It is therefore important for policymakers to integrate gender considerations into fisheries governance processes and structures to ensure equitable participation and decision-making.

Second, the research highlights the importance of economic empowerment initiatives targeted at fisherwomen. Many women in SSF struggle with financial insecurity due to informal labour arrangements, unequal access to capital, and market barriers. This means that enhancing the financial inclusion through microfinance, cooperatives and skills development can help to improve women's economic independence and therefore enable them to engage more effectively in economic activities related to fisheries.

Third, the study underscores the need for capacity building and leadership development among women in SSF. Through education, training and mentorship, women can better navigate institutional barriers and assume leadership roles in fisheries governance. By supporting fisherwomen's leadership in local fisheries committees and cooperatives, communities can move toward more inclusive decision-making processes.

Finally, recognising women as custodians of marine resources is vital for ensuring the long-term sustainability of small-scale fisheries. Women's traditional knowledge and stewardship practices play a crucial role in sustainable fisheries management, yet their voices are often absent in conservation efforts and marine governance. Increasing women's participations in working groups and integrating their knowledge into policy frameworks and conservation initiatives can strengthen community-based resource management and enhance environmental sustainability.

7.3 Contributions to the literature and future research

This thesis makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature on gender and fisheries by expanding the conceptualisation of the SSF value chain to include women's non-traditional roles. It challenges the dominant narratives that limit women's involvement to pre- and post-harvest activities and demonstrates the need for a more holistic approach to understanding gender dynamics in SSF.

Additionally, the research contributes empirical insights into the lived experiences of fisherwomen in St Helena Bay, adding to the broader discourse on gender inequality and possible pathways to gender equity in fisheries governance and management. The findings highlight the urgent need for further research into gendered labour dynamics, the gendered impact of climate change on fisherwomen, and the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equity in fisheries.

Future research could build on this study by conducting comparative analyses of different coastal communities to explore how regional variations in policy, systems of governance and cultural practices as well as socio-economic conditions affect women's roles, recognition and involvement in the SSF sector. Additionally, quantitative studies on income disparities and access to resources within SSF could provide more detailed data on the economic dimensions of gender inequity in the sector.

7.4 Final Reflection

Sustainability and resilience of small-scale fisheries cannot be achieved without fully recognising and integrating the contributions of women. Fisherwomen are not merely participants in the fisheries value chain but active agents of economic, social, and environmental change. Their knowledge, leadership, and labour are essential to the long-term viability of the sector.

A paradigm shift is needed—one that moves beyond the narrow, traditional understanding of gender roles in fisheries and embraces a more inclusive, equity-based approach. By ensuring that fisherwomen have access to resources, training, decision-making power, and economic opportunities, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can contribute to building a more just, sustainable, and resilient small-scale fisheries sector.

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