

## SESSION 4: CASE STUDY 2

### Women's voices in fisheries governance for climate-resilient food systems in Timor-Leste

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#### Abstract

Timor-Leste is highly vulnerable to climate-related disasters, with a food system heavily reliant on imports, contributing to widespread malnutrition, particularly among women and children. Fisheries, managed appropriately, can provide a climate-resilient source of nutrients and income to the vulnerable households, as fish can still be harvested from the sea during natural disasters or food system disruptions and during COVID – 19 pandemics, ensuring food availability and stability in local contexts. However, the sector remains male-dominated, and women's critical roles, such as

gleaning aquatic foods, processing and trading, are often overlooked in policy and governance.

We present a project aimed at fostering women's participation in fisheries governance by establishing co-management committees in coastal communities. These committees ensure women's representation and members are trained in climate-smart practices for coastal resource management. Through the committees, communities participate in trainings in fish processing and business literacy, strengthening resilient livelihoods with gender-sensitive technologies while promoting the nutritional value of aquatic foods, particularly for pregnant and lactating women and young children.

The project estimated the contribution of gleaning and fisheries to local diets by analysing the nutrient content of 32 aquatic species caught by both women and men fishers and quantifying their consumption. This research demonstrates that these resources are vital for year-round nutrition security and highlights the importance of gleaning in local food systems. Incorporating women's knowledge and practices into coastal management is essential to enhancing food security and the sustainability of marine resources.

By fostering the participation of women in co-management committees and valorising gleaning, we make a compelling case for including women's voices in fisheries governance to support climate resilience and enhance food systems' sustainability.

## **Introduction**

I am a researcher working on the ground in Timor-Leste, focusing on women's voices in fishery governance and their role in building climate-resilient food systems. Today, I will share insights from our project research and the realities we observe in Timor-Leste, a country facing climate vulnerabilities similar to those experienced in the Pacific Islands.

## **Climate Vulnerabilities in Timor-Leste**

Timor-Leste is frequently affected by climate-related natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and cyclones. The country's heavy reliance on food imports exacerbates its vulnerability, contributing significantly to food insecurity. For example, in 2021, a severe cyclone led to the loss of 27 lives, with many more reported missing, alongside widespread destruction of property and livelihoods. Malnutrition rates remain alarmingly high, especially among women and children.

## **Role of Women in Fisheries Governance**

While fisheries activities are often dominated by men, women play a vital yet frequently overlooked role in small-scale fishing activities. Despite their significant contribution to nutrition security and community livelihoods throughout the year, women's involvement rarely receives recognition in leadership or policymaking forums. Fisheries represent a critical resource for climate resilience, but governance structures tend to exclude women's voices.

## **Challenges Faced by Women in Fisheries**

Several challenges persist in fishery governance in Timor-Leste. One key issue is the lack of acknowledgment of women's contributions within formal fisheries management. Our research and publications, including a poster brief on the War Fish website, highlight the importance of small-scale fishery activities led by women in building food security and resilience to climate change.

## **Importance of Gender-Sensitive Strategies**

To address these challenges, our project, Recognize Hiding Harvest in Climate Adaptation, emphasizes the value of formally recognizing women's roles in fisheries. Policymakers need to integrate gender-sensitive and inclusive strategies into fishery and climate resilience governance. Such an approach will strengthen food systems and improve community livelihoods by incorporating local knowledge and women's vital contributions.

In conclusion, women's active participation in fishery governance is crucial for enhancing climate resilience and achieving sustainable food security in Timor-Leste. Integrating local, gender-sensitive approaches into governance structures is essential to foster resilient communities that can effectively adapt to evolving climate challenges.

## **Additional information**

- Link to the publication on gleaning in case people want to further explore findings about women's roles in gleaning in Timor-Leste through WorldFish project.  
<https://www.worldfishcenter.org/publication/gleaning-fisheries-timor-leste>
- Finding 32 aquatic nutritious fish types in Timor – Leste  
[Fhttps://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12348/6199](https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12348/6199)

Acacio Sarmento is a health professional, research analyst, nutrition sensitive agricultural trainer, agriculture and nutrition curriculum developer, senior researcher, program manager, advisor at National Alliance for tobacco control, health promotor, agriculture group and community facilitator and DMERL specialist.

Acacio Sarmento is a highly accomplished senior researcher and development practitioner in Timor-Leste, specializing in agriculture, nutrition, and rural economic development. With deep expertise in agriculture-sensitive nutrition and gender-inclusive programming, he brings extensive experience in research design, methodologies, data analysis, project implementation, and MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning). Acacio has a strong background in capacity building, serving as an advisor to project teams and junior researchers, and as a trainer and facilitator for government staff. His work is grounded in community-level engagement, with a proven track record of advancing food security and nutrition outcomes through collaborative, evidence-based approaches.