

RESILIENCE, REPRESENTATION, AND REFORM: WOMEN IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

Angela L. Russell*

New Zealand Rock Lobster Industry Council, Level 12, 7 Waterloo Quay, Pipitea,
Wellington, New Zealand

*angela.russell@nzrocklobster.co.nz

Women are vital to the sustainability, innovation, and resilience of the global seafood sector. In Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ), their contributions span commercial fishing, aquaculture, governance, processing, research, and policy, yet they remain underrepresented in leadership and face structural, cultural, and operational barriers. This presentation draws on a survey and personal narratives that explore women's roles, aspirations, and lived experiences across NZ's seafood industry and value chain, including the traditional roles of Māori women in customary fisheries and kaitiakitanga (a Māori term meaning guardianship, stewardship, or protection, especially of the natural environment).

Survey participants highlighted diverse pathways into the industry, including intergenerational knowledge transfer, environmental motivations, and personal passion. Despite progress in visibility and influence, 64% reported experiencing or witnessing gender inequity. Barriers included exclusion from leadership, assumptions around capability, and communication norms that marginalise women's voices. Informal mentorship was identified as a key driver of success; however, participants emphasised the need for structured, well-funded programmes like those seen abroad. Such programmes offer targeted leadership and innovation support. While NZ lacks comparable cross-sector initiatives, recent progress in aquaculture has led to more focused efforts. Still, support across commercial fishing, processing, and governance remains limited.

Despite ongoing challenges, optimism remains high as the NZ sector evolves. While participants highlighted areas still needing improvement, including the lack of psychologically safe environments to raise concerns about inequity, the presentation shares participants' significant achievements, from skippering vessels and shaping the Quota Management System to leading sustainability initiatives like the East Coast Tarakihi (stock) Rebuild Plan. Their achievements signal a shift in gender dynamics.

The presentation demonstrates that advancing women's roles in seafood is a social justice issue and a strategic imperative for the blue economy. Elevating women's voices, formalising support networks, and ensuring equitable access to leadership are vital to unlocking the sector's full potential.