

THE WOMEN OF THE SEAS: UNPACKING THE ROLE OF WOMEN-LED FISHERIES LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (FLAGS) IN EMPOWERING FEMALE OYSTER FARMERS IN LEYTE, LEYTE PHILIPPINES

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Women account for 5.0% of the fisheries sector in the Philippines (PSA, 2025). Their contribution in the value-chain overwhelmingly spans from production and processing to marketing and distribution. However, the literature concedes to the diminutive involvement of women in fisheries management and leadership. This invisibility creates a ripple of harms that substantially defines their access to resources, opportunities, and successes. Bearing this context in mind, this paper examines how women through fisheries local action groups (FLAGS) navigate these issues. It specifically looks into the case of the women-led FLAG, *Toctoc Baywalk Fisherfolks Association*, from the oyster farming sector in Leyte, Leyte, Philippines. In the face of empowerment, FLAGS provide women and their interests both a platform and opportunity to be seen and heard. In various contexts, these groups have been utilized as an intervention mechanism in planning, lobbying, and policy implementation. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, the exploration of the role and contribution of women in oyster farming. Second, the identification of the challenges faced by women in this sector. Finally, using Nabeer's empowerment framework, this study provides a qualitative analysis into the impacts of women-led FLAGS, in the local example of *Toctoc Baywalk Fisherfolks Association*, in Leyte, Leyte, Philippines, in the empowerment of female oyster farmers. Nabeer's framework highlights the embeddedness of the dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements in the overall empowerment of women. With the challenges presented by the persistence of gender norms and stereotypes which often curtail the participation of women in management and leadership in fisheries, the study of FLAGS provides a rich ground of understanding how women's visibility in these positions affects their overall access to resources, opportunities, policy, decision-making powers, etc.