

“It feels as if they wanted to get rid of us”: Women’s struggles for justice in the Galician on-foot shellfish fishery in Spain



By Milena Arias Schreiber & Sophia Kochalski*

Women collecting shellfish in the intertidal zone are known in Galicia as ‘mariscadoras’. Having a long history as a subsistence fishery, on-foot shellfish harvesting started as a commercial activity in the late 1950s. Demand from the canning industry and from local and national markets prompted a massive expansion of the fishery [1], in which up to 60,000 shellfish collectors took part at peak times [2]. The expansion and informality of the sector resulted in local conflicts, with media coverage often speaking about “quarrelling, uneducated women” when referring to the women shellfish harvesters [3; 4; 5; 6]. Supported by the Galician regional administration – in particular by women in charge – the fishery went through a professionalization process between 1995 and 2005. The objective was to turn “shell fishing on foot into an activity that is the main source of income for the people who do it, and that allows them to receive appropriate social benefits” [7, p. 46]. Almost 3,000 women were trained in marine conservation and shellfish farming techniques [3], and a new system of fishing licenses was enforced for which affiliation to the social security system was compulsory. Consequently, the number of mariscadoras halved, but the average price of the shellfish doubled [3]. The women were supported in organizing themselves in fisheries associations and were integrated into the traditional fishing guilds (‘cofradías’). Overall, on-foot shellfish fishing was transformed into a strongly regulated activity [1] that evolved from occasional harvesting of resources to a year-round activity that – besides harvesting – includes the repopulation and cleaning of shellfish beds, removal of predators, and monitoring of the beaches to avoid the presence of poachers.

Photo: A group of shellfish collectors at work in one of the Galician bays. © Nando Iglesias, 2023

Location:

A Coruña and Pontevedra, Galicia, Spain

Ecosystem type:

Marine, Brackish

Main gear:

Gleaning, shovels, rakes, sickles, hooks, knives and scrapers.

Target species:

Cockle (*birollo* or *berberecho*, *Cerastoderma* spp.)

Grooved carpet shell (*ameixa fina* or *almeja fina*, *Ruditapes decussatus*)

Pullet carpet shell (*ameixa babosa* or *almeja babosa*, *Venerupis corrugata*)

Japanese carpet shell (*ameixa xaponesa* or *almeja japonesa*, *Ruditapes philippinarum*)

No. of small-scale fishers:

Approx. 3,500



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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- **Social**
- Economic
- Market
- Infrastructure/wellbeing
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

Sources:

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The women shellfish collectors have been able to improve their working conditions, profits, quality of life, and participation in resource management over the last two decades. However, the deteriorating state of the resources and the marine environment is a cause for concern. Climate change and the diverse anthropogenic activities in the heavily populated coastal strip have a direct impact on shellfish populations and the livelihoods of their collectors.

Other inequalities are related to gender roles and gender-segregated fishing activities. Many women have shouldered the quadruple burden of unpaid housework, caring for children, caring for the parents, and fishing as paid labour. While mariscadoras value the flexibility of the job, it also means that it has long been viewed as a 'family aid' only. Notably, shellfishing from small boats, which is predominantly carried out by men, is more profitable [6], and fishers who fish from boats have to renew their permits less frequently.

The current 63 Galician fishing guilds include both men (57%) and women (43%), but only three among them had female guild presidents ('patrona mayor') in 2023. According to a regional association of mariscadoras ('Mulleres salgadas'), running as a candidate is strongly discouraged since *"women who decide to come forward are accused of being ambitious, wanting to attract attention or wanting to be protagonists, and even their private lives are questioned"* [8]. Their participation in decision-making is also hindered by the law governing the fishing guilds. Despite being self-employed and owning their fishing gears, mariscadoras have a status equivalent to that of a crew member, not a ship owner, which creates an imbalance in the internal voting and elections system. A biologist employed by a fishing guild explains that *"the women sometimes have innovative ideas on how to better manage their fishery, but these ideas are opposed by men who vote against their implementation for the only purpose of power display."*

Finally, collecting shellfish outdoors is a physically demanding activity, and many mariscadoras suffer from health problems derived from long forced postures and exposure to physical agents such as constant humidity, sun, and cold water. Common sickness among these women are osteoarthritis, lumbago, rheumatism, and fibromyalgia [9]. In practice, the mariscadoras have difficulties getting these health-associated problems recognized as occupational diseases.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Shellfish fishing on foot is an extractive activity which takes place in the maritime or maritime-terrestrial area, utilizing selective and specific gear for the exclusive purpose of capturing one or more species of mollusks, crustaceans, tunicates, echinoderms, and other marine invertebrates, for commercial purposes ([Law 11/2008](#), amended by [Law 6/2009](#)).



...sector also receives regular support from the state in the form of monitoring shellfish for contaminants and emergency aid in the event of exceptional catch failures. This is by no means a sure-fire success but is often the result of lengthy negotiations.



Dealing with justice

Sources [cont.]:

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Sorting out small shellfish on the beach © Nando Iglesias 2023

Along with professionalization came the mariscadoras increased pride in their work [4]. Their work is now recognized as a 'real' profession, meaning that shellfish collectors are insured against cessation periods and can collect entitlements for pension payments. However, the professionalization, associated with higher incomes and a greater time commitment, came also with a slow masculinization of this profession [6]. From 2009 to 2023, the proportion of men with a harvesting permit increased from 10% to 25%.

A positive perception of the mariscadoras from the general public is still missing, who often assumes the beach is for everyone. Moreover, the public doesn't fully appreciate the work and value of the mariscadoras for the environment, cultural heritage, and socio-economic structure of Galician coastal communities. To highlight their work, the mariscadoras are very active, organizing events and exhibitions, giving interviews on television and in newspapers, offering tours in which they explain their activities ('pescatourism') and joining relevant networks. One example is the annual prize for a selected mariscadora offered since 2021 by the organization 'Mulleres salgadas'. This prize is meant to encourage the mariscadoras and represents a small recognition of their work.

The sector also receives regular support from the state, in the form of monitoring shellfish for contaminants and emergency aid in the event of exceptional catch failures. This is by no means a sure-fire success but is often the result of lengthy negotiations. Both the Cofradías and specific women's organizations lobby for necessary improvements, better regulations, equal treatment, and active political participation.

Where the state leaves gaps, the women themselves act in collective action. This includes activities that are not paid for, such as the repopulation of fishing grounds by investing in and spreading seeds ('semilla'), cleaning the fishing grounds of algae, and daily monitoring of the beaches to detect and deter poachers. These are also the areas where the mariscadoras would like to get more support in order to progress, to maintain an activity important for the region, and to make the sector attractive to new generations. Despite all these efforts, as is the case in many other European small-scale fisheries, the mariscadoras' fishery is slowly declining, after centuries of operation.



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