



Social Hotspots in the
**Aquaculture
Industry**



Social benefits and risks of aquaculture

Aquaculture, the farming of aquatic organisms, is a fast-growing industry. It is acknowledged as a key provider of ecosystem services as an alternative to over-fishing in the oceans, benefits to society as a major source of proteins for the global population and as a leading job provider in the food sector. However, as with any sector which has seen rapid growth, its success story comes with drawbacks. Aquaculture's prosperity will depend to a large extent on the close monitoring of its risks and impacts.

Amongst the risks presented by aquaculture (environmental, food safety, animal welfare, etc.), social accountability issues occupy a special place. Social risk is influenced by a variety of factors. These factors start in the country where the activity is performed; countries have specific labour histories, dynamics in their labour force and different measures to mitigate social risks. The factors continue where the aquaculture industry links with other industries such as feed factories and hatcheries, which can induce hidden social hotspots (see box 1).

Importers, brands, and retailers can no longer just look at the flow and availability of seafood product when analysing a seafood supply chain. The whole workforce supply chain must now be transparent. In this document, amfori will focus on the main social hotspots at the fish farming and processing stage of the aquaculture supply chain.

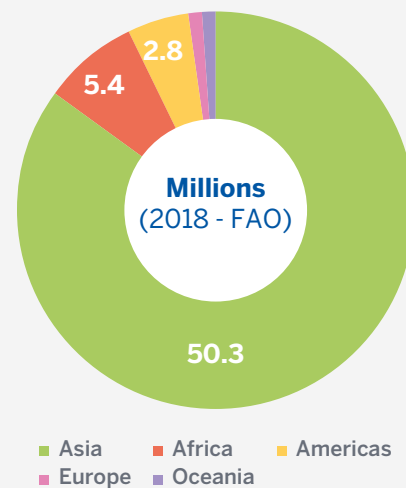
Box 1. Hidden social hotspots in the industry

Social hotspots are not only concentrated on farms and in processing companies but also exist at other tiers of supply chains.

The most critical issue concerns **fishing vessels** catching 'trash fish' for feed factories: there is [evidence](#) from NGOs and human rights coalitions of **forced labour, child labour and human trafficking**, in particular in South-East Asia.

One of the factors that can lead to these hotspots is the length and complexity of aquaculture supply chains. There are [three main stages of production](#) (fish hatchery, fish farms, processing and export). Additionally, a feed supply chain generally supplements the seafood supply chain.

FIGURE 1. World employment for fishers and fish farmers



Migration and contract labour: increased social risks for the whole sector

Two key features of the sector should be considered when addressing social responsibility:

- **Migration:** Many production countries have a long history of internal and/or international **migration**. Migrant workers are hired not only to work on fish farms but also in processing companies. Migrants are particularly exposed to the risk of forced labour. They can be trapped by unscrupulous recruiters or employers in an environment of dependence:
 - Recruiters can charge them excessive fees
 - Migrant workers' visas may be tied to their employers
- **Use of contract labour:** Contract labour is the indirect employment of workers, through labour contractors or recruitment agencies. The sector often relies on contract labour for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. Contract labour may be used to avoid hiring regular workers and thereby avoid legally required welfare benefits. Contract and migrant labour are exposed to multiple hazards, such as:
 - Inferior labour status
 - Poor economic conditions
 - Increased exposure to occupational health and safety (OHS) risks

These workers also often face barriers to unionising, which compounds these issues.



Social hotspots of fish farming

Aquaculture farms vary in size from family-run farms to large-scale firms. They are generally located in rural coastal communities. The most serious social challenges include:

Child labour

Two main factors account for the risk of child labour on aquaculture farms:

- **Low-income communities:** the majority of production occurs in developing countries. Particularly in rural areas, families tend to depend on the labour of their children to sustain themselves
- **Nature of activity:** aquaculture farming requires continuous surveillance. Farm workers are usually accommodated onsite, with their families

Children can assist in a variety of farm operations (feeding, fertilising, cleaning ponds, harvesting fish, fries or seeds, etc.). Carrying out these duties, they can be exposed to hazards (contact with chemicals, lifting of heavy loads, long time spent in water-logged areas, etc.).

Health and safety

Aquaculture farming comprises tasks involving a variety of equipment, chemicals, biological agents and physical environments. Therefore, OHS risks are numerous (see table 1).

COMMON HAZARDS ON AQUACULTURE FARMS AND POTENTIAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES*

Tasks	Hazards	Health consequences
Working on aquaculture units and water in general	Falling into water Slippery walkways	Death by drowning Broken bones and head injuries from slips
Transporting aquaculture feeds, fertilisers and chemicals	Carrying heavy loads	Musculoskeletal injury
Other tasks in tending aquaculture farms	Pathogens and parasites Mosquitoes Exposure to pollution and contamination, disease control compounds	Fungal and viral infections Malaria, dengue Pesticide poisoning
Guarding facilities	Being attacked Night work	Injury, death Exhaustion, sleep deprivation

* Adapted from FAO and ILO, 2013. [Guidance on addressing child labour in fisheries and aquaculture](#)



Social hotspots of fish processing

In processing factories, common challenges are:

Child and forced labour

Some reports, such as an [investigation by the Guardian](#), have revealed cases of child labour and forced labour in small and informal processing units that supply larger export processing companies.

Decent wages

Workers hired in processing units generally have few skills and benefit from little training.

Basic wages are generally low, barely the legal minimum.

Bonuses, through piece rates or incentive schemes, often constitute a high proportion of the total remuneration. In such cases, workers should still receive the minimum wage based on normal productivity and normal working hours.

Working hours

There are risks of excessive overtime, especially during peak periods.

These risks can be enhanced by the abovementioned piece rates or incentive schemes. Such schemes may encourage workers to work unusually long hours in order to reach an extra payment.

Compulsory overtime may also be an issue, particularly for migrant workers. This is due mainly to their vulnerable position; away from their families they are more likely to be forced into working extra hours against their will.

Health and safety

There is a high incidence of occupational accidents and diseases in processing factories. The main Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) risks at processing level are summarised in table 2.

Workers' accommodation

Workers are frequently accommodated on the farm, which can pose challenges regarding:

- **Decent housing:** housing should respect local standards and [ILO recommendation 115](#)
- **Workers' accommodation arrangements:** Decent housing should not cost the workers more than a reasonable proportion of their income; housing arrangements should not restrict their rights and freedoms

Working hours

The cycle of fish production involves labour-intensive operations. There are risks of:

- **Excessive working hours:** working extra hours without compensation
- **Inadequate rest periods:** not enough workday breaks, daily and weekly rests or annual leave
- **Compulsory overtime:** overtime being imposed by farm owner

This is particularly acute during peak seasons and for workers accommodated on the farm.

Besides, excessive hours of work and inadequate periods of rest and recuperation can compromise workers' health and workplace safety.

COMMON HAZARDS ON AQUACULTURE PROCESSING FACTORIES AND POTENTIAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES*		
Tasks	Hazards	Health consequences
Working on wet aquaculture units in general	Slippery walkways	Broken bones and head injuries from slips
Cleaning and handling fish and shellfish: peeling, processing or smoking	Deficient/unsafe equipment, machinery and infrastructure, including unsuitable electrical equipment operated in unsafe conditions	Electrocution, injury, death
	Sharp tools	Lacerations, blistered hands and feet
	Long hours standing or bending, repetitive movements	Backache and other musculoskeletal strains and disorders, exhaustion
	Smoke and chemicals	Respiratory problems, poisoning

* Adapted from FAO and ILO, 2013. [Guidance on addressing child labour in fisheries and aquaculture](#)

Discrimination

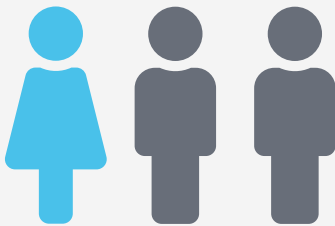
Women usually predominate in post-harvest activities (see figure 2), which are mainly associated with processing activities.

This “feminised” work environment requires an explicit gender focus when addressing social issues in processing facilities. Indeed, this feminisation often correlates with:

- Inequal access to training and opportunities
- Poor wage conditions for women
- Sexism and harassment issues
- A lack of representation of women in workers' unions

FIGURE 2. Women in the fisheries and aquaculture sector according to The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture published in 2020 by FAO

In 2018, women accounted for 50% of workers in the sector overall but only 14% if post-harvest activities are excluded.



What companies can do to tackle these issues

Social risks have complex origins and profound impacts.

Therefore, the answer cannot be straightforward and single. A coherent (i.e. inside the corporate responsibility policy of each company) and global (i.e. across the entire supply chain) approach shall be implemented.

Importers, brands and retailers who want to take actions can:

- Map their supply chains to create the greatest possible transparency in their supply chain structure and in labour situations
- Identify high-risk areas with regards to the main human rights violations
- Assist workers who are in vulnerable positions

Voluntary Sustainability Standards as useful instruments for identifying hazards

Seafood buyers have made various commitments to improve the sustainability of their aquaculture seafood sourcing. Among them is the increasing use of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS).

VSS are useful guides to identify and assess potential hazards. They rely on solid accountability mechanisms, with third-party verifications.

In the aquaculture sector, they have moved from a purely environmental approach to a CSR approach, and now include social responsibility within their scope.

amfori BSCI

amfori BSCI is a sustainability initiative which provides a system enabling all companies sourcing all types of products to progressively improve working conditions in their supply chain.

The [amfori BSCI Code of Conduct](#) sets out 11 principles that participants and their business partners commit to implementing within their supply chains.

These 11 principles draw on important international labour standards (mainly International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and declarations) and shall be implemented considering national, regional, or sectorial regulations.

Their implementation relies on the set-up of a Social Management System.

This system, through a step-by-step approach, will assist the company in monitoring and continuously improving its own social performance as well as that of its business partners.

As such, amfori BSCI constitutes both an integrated and global answer to social risks in aquaculture supply chains.



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