



# THE GENDERED IMPACT OF FORCED LABOR AND TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS ON FISHING VESSELS A TECHNICAL BRIEF

## INTRODUCTION

### The importance of gender in FL/TIP

Forced labor and trafficking in persons (FL/TIP) on fishing vessels takes a tremendous toll on fishers. Yet the impact of their exploitation does not end with fishers themselves, but extends to their households. This ripple effect is especially felt by women who are the primary caregivers and household decision makers while their husbands are away at sea.

In comparison to male fishers, the impact of FL/TIP on women has not been well understood; however, Plan International's study, *The Effects of Forced Labor and Trafficking in Persons on Female Relatives of Male Fishers*,<sup>1</sup> is one of the few that delves into the gendered aspect by showing how FL/TIP on fishing vessels is a household issue. The study also details how this exploitation and abuse manifests in psychological harm, financial loss, extra work and care burdens which are shouldered by women as acting heads of households. According to this study, wives of fishers who have been victims of FL/TIP reported increased stress and anxiety, and they worked longer hours to make ends meet under oppressive debt burdens linked to the male fisher's employment. These chronic debt burdens and dependence on the fisher's precarious income leave the family especially vulnerable to household economic shocks. In some cases, children also had to stop going to school in order to work to support the family.

While women are heavily impacted by FL/TIP on fishing vessels, they also can and do play a vital role in reporting FL/TIP if they know what FL/TIP is, what to look for and where to report violations. Women can and do serve as natural advocates for their male relatives on fishing vessels, and warn others about the danger of FL/TIP. And yet programs to combat FL/TIP in the fishing industry have not focused sufficiently on the role women can play.

### Eleven indicators of FL/TIP

1. Abuse of vulnerability
2. Deception
3. Restriction of movement
4. Isolation
5. Physical and sexual violence
6. Intimidation and threats
7. Retention of identity documents
8. Withholding of wages
9. Debt bondage
10. Abusive working and living conditions
11. Excessive overtime

*As stipulated by the international Labour Organizations Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour*

<sup>1</sup> This brief was adapted from the report, *The Effects of forced labor and trafficking in persons on female relatives of male fishers*. The final report was produced by Dewi Ratnawulan and Daniel Lindgren at Rapid Asia.



### FL/TIP in the fishing industry

Fishing is one of the most precarious professions in the world, and ships by their nature are remote and isolated workplaces. As fishing stocks are depleted, fishing vessels must go further out to sea for longer periods of time to catch fewer fish. There is also an insidious intersection between illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and labor exploitation with fishers being forced to engage in such illegal activities. All these factors combine to make fishers highly vulnerable to FL/TIP.

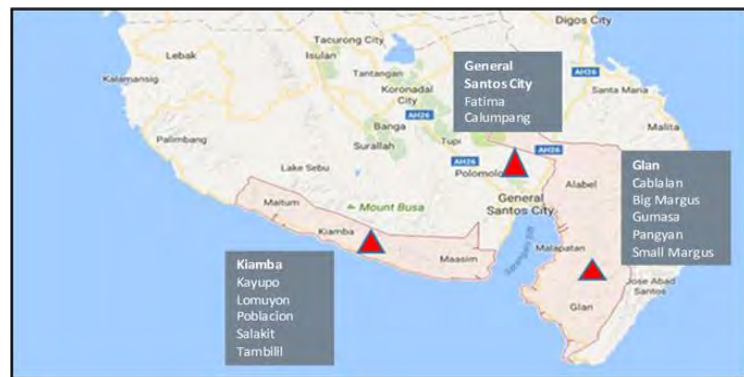
In the Philippines, the terms FL/TIP are often used interchangeably. In The Republic Act (RA) 10364 (Expanded Trafficking in Persons Act), FL is considered to be a form of TIP. According to this study fishers experienced many of the FL indicators mentioned in the textbox above. The chronic and systemic lack of personal protective equipment and medical care is a heightened concern during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

### Gender dynamics in the Philippine fishing industry today

Within the fishing sector in the Philippines, jobs are defined by gender. Men fish on vessels and women engage in land-based fishing activities, although a few women (5 of 210 interviewed) also fished, including fishing offshore. According to the study, women are active in repairing nets, cleaning catch, drying, storing, selling and trading fish. Women typically do not have formal roles in the fishing sector but help out as needed. While this increases their workload, their work in fishing is typically unremunerated.

### Methodology

Field work took place in 2020 between February and March in three municipalities in Sarangani Province and General Santos City (GenSan) in Mindanao, where SAFE Seas is being implemented. The study population consisted of a wide range of participants including male fishers, their wives and female relatives; local government officials; non-governmental organization



(NGO) staff, community members; and boat owners. We also conducted interviews for the wives of fishers who had been victims of FL/TIP while on fishing vessels.<sup>2</sup>

The study's mixed-methods approach consisted of both qualitative and quantitative techniques including a desk review, survey, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). The field team surveyed a total of 210 women, the vast majority being fishers' wives.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed description of the methodology is presented in the final report.



They also conducted 10 KIIs (seven women and three men), six single-sex FGDs (four female, two male) and 10 IDIs with wives whose husbands were victims of FL/TIP.

## FINDINGS

### Gender norms in fisher families

Gender norms are those social norms that determine what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior for men and women in society. Gender norms determine women's and men's access to and control over resources, and the roles each play in the fishing sector. In the Philippines, gender norms task women with private sphere and men with public sphere roles and responsibilities. In fishing households, women are tasked with the household chores of food preparation, grocery shopping, cleaning and child care along with their fishing-related activities. All of this is unpaid work. As a result, women and their families are heavily reliant on their husband's income. In the study, many women expressed their desire to start their own business or gain employability skills. They wanted to be more financially independent and able to support the family so that their husbands did not have to accept exploitative work for the family's survival.

### Women's awareness of FL/TIP

According to the survey, 30% of women said they had never heard the term FL/TIP, while 50% said they had heard of it but did not know much about it, leaving 21% who said they were familiar with the topic. In contrast, only slightly less than 15% of male fishers had ever heard of FL/TIP.<sup>3</sup> The most common sources of awareness were TV documentaries and other programs (59%), followed by news and media reports (55%), family and friends (33%) and radio (29%), demonstrating that mass media and word-of-mouth play significant roles in spreading information about FL/TIP.

Awareness alone, however, was not enough to lessen the negative effects of these abusive practices, as they tended to be normalized within the community and across generations. Most women confirmed their fisher husbands would rather keep quiet and accept their situation to avoid trouble, recognizing the significant power and wealth imbalance between themselves and fishing vessel owners. As one fisher's wife stated, "We cannot complain, and husbands discourage us because they don't want to have any trouble. We feel we don't have a voice because we are poor and will lose if we fight against the rich employers." (FGD with women Kiamba)

Fishing is one of the most poorly paid occupations, often preventing parents from sending their children to secondary school, giving sons few options, other than fishing, for make a living. Moreover, the majority of fishers and their wives were neither aware of their rights nor understood what decent working conditions should be or what entitlements they should receive. Most were unaware that FL/TIP is illegal. This does not mean they ignored the abuse and exploitation they endured, but rather the lack of

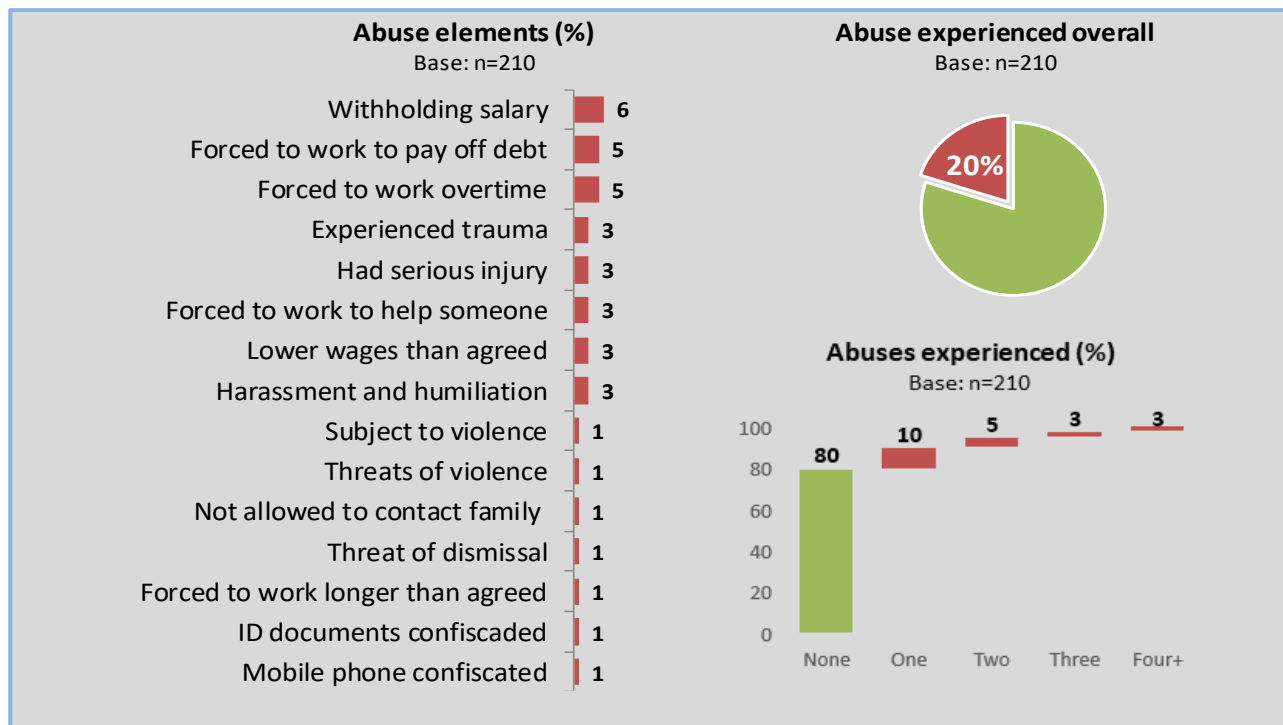
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<sup>3</sup> This percentage came from the results of a project survey of fishers conducted in March, 2020.



alternative livelihoods combined with the acceptance that fishing is tough, compelled them to tolerate their circumstances.

While women may not know the term, when given a brief explanation of what constitutes FL/TIP, they were able to list both physical and non-physical abusive acts and conditions that the International Labor Organization (ILO) consider to be signs, or indicators of FL/TIP. The primary forms of exploitative working conditions mentioned by fishers' wives in the survey are listed in Figure 1. Overall, 20% of women had a husband or son who experienced at least one of these abuses, and half of them had experienced two or more.



**Figure 1. Types of abuses experienced by fishers**

However, a large majority of all women surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that FL/TIP was a serious problem (84%), that families suffer (78%), that it was a priority issue to solve (98%) and that they would like to help (98%). The difference in responses was negligible between wives whose husbands had experienced FL/TIP and those who did not.

### Reluctance to report

Manipulation and withholding of salaries are common tactics that ruthless employers use, however, fishers and their wives seldom report them to the Philippine authorities, in part because there is little government enforcement of existing fishing regulations and labor laws. For example, not one participant

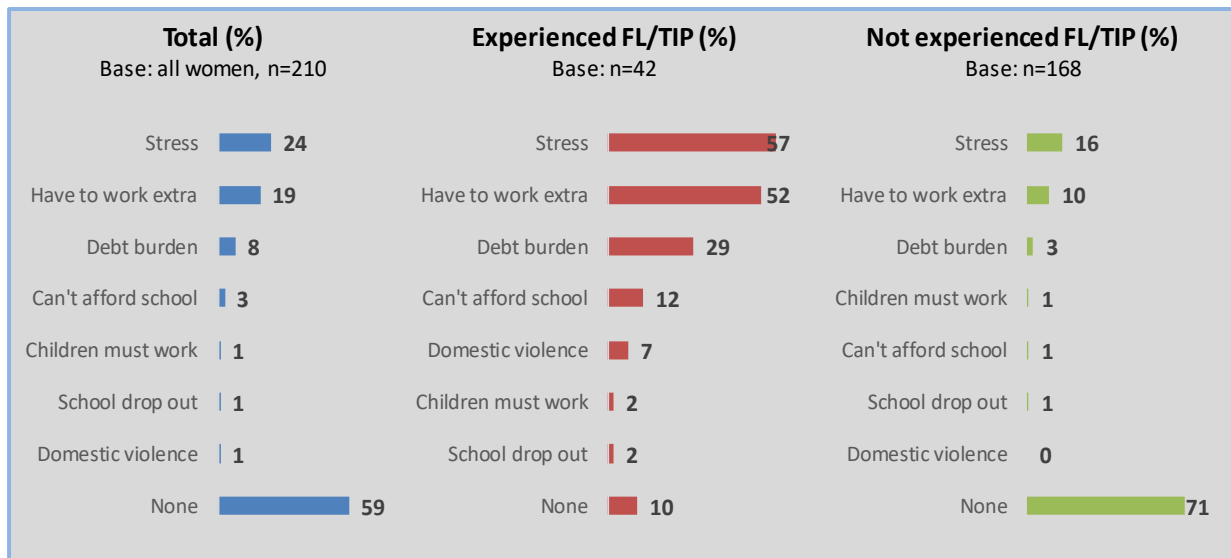




knew any fisher who had an employment contract despite it being legally mandatory for employers to provide them. Perhaps even more significant are the threats that employers make to fishers who complain about their working conditions. As one fisher explained, “The employer threatened fishers, saying they will not be selected for the next fishing trip if they refused to do what they were told to do. Therefore, we cannot say no to work extra hours when arriving in the port.” (FGD with men in Glan)

### The impact of FL/TIP on women and families

The negative impact of labor abuse and human trafficking on women and families can take many forms. Typically, there is financial pressure, which can lead to children dropping out of school, growing debt burden and domestic violence. To demonstrate the damage that FL/TIP can inflict, interviewers asked women what their families had experienced since their husbands started to work in the fishing sector.



**Figure 2. Fish work and its impact on the family**

As shown in Figure 2, 71% of women whose husbands had never experienced FL/TIP reported that fish work had no negative effects on the family. In contrast, 90% of women whose husbands had been victims of FL/TIP said their families suffered at least one negative effect. Stress and having to work extra to make ends meet were the most commonly mentioned consequences on women, followed by debt burden. One woman gave an example of the negative impact that FL/TIP has on children, stating, “As wives, we feel the burden, especially since we are left to take care of our children without a source of income. We had to resort to looking for ways to find money, mainly to feed the kids and their education. Lack of money leads kids not able to pursue higher education and female kids to marry early.” (FGD with fisher’s wives from Glan)



### Poverty, debt bondage and debt enslavement

Among the nine primary work sectors in the Philippines, fisher households have the highest poverty rate, with 34% living below the official poverty line.<sup>4</sup> Because of their low-income status, most families have no financial safety net and their access to conventional loans or credit is extremely limited. Fisher families, therefore, must resort to informal loans from their boat owner employers, pawn brokers and informal moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. To pay back these loans, fishers will accept any job, even under exploitive conditions, or will continue to work for unscrupulous boat owners until their debts are paid through future salary deductions. However, these debts are rarely paid off.

Fishers, tied to their abusive employers, have no choice but to accept low wages and poor working conditions. This manipulative practice is referred to as debt bondage, with the extreme form called debt enslavement. Both are considered FL/TIP and are illegal under Philippine law.

In most fisher households, women are tasked with managing household finances, including loans. The cycle of debt adds to the stress women bear and often results in them taking on extra work, and their children dropping out of school. An example of the destructive consequences of debt bondage is given in this case study.

#### **In her words: A fisher wife describes the never-ending cycle of debt**

Before sailing, they are given cash advances of at least 1,500 pesos. We then buy what he needs, materials for hook and line, and food items like coffee, biscuits, etc. So how much is left? Barely enough to buy rice for a month. He may or may not catch anything. On rare occasions, he can take home a slightly bigger amount, but the debt is still there. Cash advances are deducted from his earnings. So, if he earns very little, it will be carried over to the next trip. We never get out of debt. That's also why he cannot go to other vessels because he is tied to his debts.

Moreover, my husband has never been paid immediately, even though the catch is sold for cash at the fishing port. They go into bidding for the highest price, and the office will take time to compute our earnings. Sometimes they pay after two weeks. So, what happens while waiting? We go into debt further because I have to buy food on credit. Furthermore, I have to borrow money for school and to pay our bills. It's an ongoing situation.

<sup>4</sup> LeBaron, G., N. Howard, C. Thibos, and Kyritsis. 2018. Confronting root causes: forced labor in global supply chains. *OpenDemocracy and Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute: 27* and UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, A/HRC/33/46 (4 July 2016) and ILO. 2020: 18. [https://shiptoshorerights.org/wp-content/uploads/Endline-Research-Findings-on-Fishers-and-Seafood-Workers-in-Thailand\\_EN.pdf](https://shiptoshorerights.org/wp-content/uploads/Endline-Research-Findings-on-Fishers-and-Seafood-Workers-in-Thailand_EN.pdf)



### Agency and the potential roles for women

In terms of agency, direct control and power over resources, women do have much broader decision-making power regarding household finances — such as taking and servicing loans, and decisions around children’s schooling — while their husbands are at sea. According to the study, 84% of women said they had more decision-making power when their husband was out at sea. They also made decisions on household loans 86% of the time. Men tend to make work-related decisions. There were also examples of couples sharing decision making. Women’s heightened work and care responsibilities meant they had much less time to devote to community decision making and leadership with less than half involved in community organizations. However the study also showed a correlation between those women who were involved in community-based activities having greater access to resources and information, such as training and livelihoods programs.

Women in fisher families have a vested interest in eradicating FL/TIP on fishing vessels. Whether their household had direct experience of FL/TIP or not, women equally recognized it as a problem and even more expressed their willingness to do something about it. One hundred percent of women whose households had experienced FL/TIP felt it was a priority to be addressed, but they were not aware of existing services or mechanisms for reporting labor violations. Being onshore, there is potential for women to take collective action advocating for local government action against labor violations.

“I wish women will [have] an opportunity to come together to help each other when their husbands are in trouble,” said one woman during an in-depth interview in Kiamba.

A key learning from this study is the need to reframe the issue of FL/TIP on fishing vessels. It is not just negatively impacting the individual fisher. The consequences of FL/TIP on fishing vessels reverberate throughout the family unit and have multi-generational repercussions. This reframing of the issue requires expanding the unit of analysis beyond the individual to the household with an intentional focus on women.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for women's active involvement in combatting FL/TIP on fishing vessels fall into four categories:

1. **Target women with FL/TIP awareness-raising campaigns and existing grievance mechanisms.** Educate women on labor rights, legal services and advocacy strategies, especially about regulations on withholding salaries and minimum wage entitlements under prevailing fishing law. Ensure that grievance mechanisms and government services are safe and accessible for women. Improve coordination of services at the local level and assist women to create formal linkages to these programs. Use communication channels that women use, such as TV and radio.
2. **Focus on women's financial literacy and access to affordable loans and social protection programs.** Mitigating labor vulnerability at sea starts with ensuring that fisher households are economically resilient. We can address a critical risk factor of FL/TIP — debt bondage — by focusing on women's financial literacy, access to affordable loans and social safety nets, such as community savings groups.
3. **Support women with skills development and diversification.** Improve women's financial independence and break the gender glass ceiling for women's employment options, with the potential of greatly reducing household financial pressures.
4. **Raise stakeholder awareness of the important role women can play in eradicating FL/TIP on fishing vessels.** Finally, local and national stakeholders need to be aware of how vital it is to partner with women in the fight against FL/TIP on fishing vessels. Stakeholders should bring women into the conversation and equip them with the skills and resources needed to advocate effectively for the protection and well-being of fishers, their wives and their families.









## The SAFE Seas project

The *Safeguarding Against and Addressing Fishers' Exploitation* (SAFE Seas) of Plan International aims to combat FL/TIP on fishing vessels in Indonesia and the Philippines. To do so, the project employs a two-pronged strategy — 1) to improve enforcement and regulatory framework by establishing effective interagency coordination mechanisms for fisher protection, and 2) to raise awareness and understanding of labor exploitation in order to increase the capacity of fishers to report and seek remedies when their rights have been violated. SAFE Seas is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor/Bureau of International Labor Affairs and is implemented by Plan International in Indonesia and the Philippines.

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Guiding Sustainable Change

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