

## Chapter 36

### Gender in fisheries development

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Fisheries as a source of food, livelihood and income is probably as old as human civilization. Millions of men and women across the world, especially the developing world, are dependent on the sector. While fish capture in the open seas has generally been a male preserve conditioned by various social, cultural and economic factors; women also have significant contributions for sustaining household nutritional and income security. They have been engaged in fishing in inshore coastal waters, inland water bodies like rivers and ponds; and in post harvest activities like pre-processing, processing, drying, salting, and allied activities like marketing, net making and mending etc. With increasing volumes of fish coming from culture fisheries the participation of men and women in these activities are also increasing. Suffice to say that both men and women contribute to the overall growth and development of the fisheries sector. However, often women and their contributions tend to be marginalized in the fisheries development debate.

#### **Women's roles in fisheries**

In the marine fisheries sector, fishing is largely a male preserve. Women rarely venture into the sea, conditioned by cultural and social taboos rather than by skill and endurance. However, the support from women in managing the households and in taking up subsistence or other livelihood activities related to fisheries activities that may actually go into the household income security need to be acknowledged. Studies show that women comprise about 46% of the labour force in small-scale capture fisheries-related activities (FAO, World Bank, IFAD, 2008). It is as high as 73% in Nigeria to a low of 4% in Mozambique. At least 50 % of the workforce in inland fisheries and 60 % of those marketing fish are women in Asia and West Africa.

Women glean for fish, shell fish, molluscs and crustaceans. There are traditional women divers in various parts of the world who fish with primitive fishing implements. Women have been more predominant post-

harvest activities like marketing; drying; smoking; salting; fermenting; and other seafood industry oriented pre-processing and processing. Women generally occupy the lowest rung of workers in seafood factories at the floor level and their work comes under the unskilled category which results in lower pay structures when compared to male workers.

The loading and unloading work at landing centres are also mostly done by men. Post landing women are actively engaged in sorting, rarely in auctioning and trading, and very active in marketing, especially in retail trade. In trading it is the access to credit and availability of resources that effect participation. It is seen that where women have access to and control over resources their interventions and participation in markets is high. It has also been observed that when women establish themselves in markets, the men from their households slowly step in and then the business goes into their hands. Fish marketing in most developing countries are poorly organised and lack of cold chain and other infrastructural facilities force vendors to transact their businesses on the same day. Women are usually relegated to the poor market spaces and have to jostle with other players in the market. Women are also engaged in sun drying of excess fish or fish procured for drying purposes. They are also the backbone of the seafood pre-processing and processing sectors all over the world with almost all of the floor level work like peeling, sorting, grading, cooking and packing being carried out by them. However, in all countries it has been observed that women are disadvantaged as far as the wages are concerned and invariably earn less than the men engaged in this industry. The working conditions also leave a lot to be desired.

While it is a fact that there are few women in sea fishing, women harvest fish from inshore coastal waters by gleaning, and fish in inland water bodies in Asia, East and West Africa, and the Pacific. Much of the catch is for household subsistence and goes for meeting the household needs.

Women are active in small scale aquaculture where they perform myriad roles like helping men in pond preparation, feeding, packing etc. They are involved in pond preparation, stocking, feeding and harvesting operations along with the men. However, their labour tends to be classified as family labour and thus often goes unrecognised. Ownership of farms is still largely male dominated. Just like in agriculture a focussed shift towards empowering women by creating ownership and providing technical guidance and providing suitable inputs, the production can be further enhanced and their contributions increased considerably.

In large scale aquaculture they are paid for their jobs, which are similar to the ones they carry out in small scale aquaculture, like feeding and packing. Women's roles sometimes are restricted due to the location of aquaculture sites which may be inaccessible and employers prefer male employees as they are supposed to fend for themselves under difficult living conditions, while women need special attention. In some states of India, women's involvement in aquaculture is limited to collection of wild seed of shrimp in inter-tidal regions. A recent study by the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR that focussed on small scale aquaculture systems found that, women were present in all the major nodes of the aquaculture value chains. They contribute in almost all activities right from pond preparation, stocking, feeding, water management and health care to harvesting.

A sector which is having great potential and can be exploited is the ornamental fish breeding. Thailand has seen a lot of success in generating entrepreneurship for women in this sector.

Women are also involved in net making and mending which is a supplementary activity in coastal areas. Mariculture activities like cage and pen culture, seaweed culture also have potential for generating employment for women in fishing communities.

Women also manage households attending to cooking, cleaning and care giving when they are engaged in these fisheries related activities. However women in fishing communities are rarely involved in decision-making related to fishing at the household, community, regional and national levels. Women's access to resources like credit, education and health care also tends to be poor. Due to the changes taking place in fisheries across the world, there are increasing insecurities and irregularities when it comes to assuring incomes to women's work and they tend to be bigger losers and more vulnerable.

FAO (2012) makes the following observations:

- In Bangladesh, women's non-governmental organizations and other entrepreneurs have encouraged women to participate in aquaculture activities.
- In Belize, most workers involved in processing are women from rural communities where unemployment levels are high and poverty is greatest.
- In Cuba, female workers constitute 27% of the aquaculture workforce (19 % are intermediate and higher education technicians; 11% have attended higher education institutions).
- In Estonia, the gender ratio of the aquaculture workforce is 1:1.
- In Israel, the workforce is a skilled one because of the highly technical nature of aquaculture in the country. In a sector where women make up about 95 % of the workforce, most workers have a high school diploma while a high percentage has a degree (Bachelor of Science or Master of Science).
- In Jamaica, about 8–11 % of fish farmers are women who own and operate fish farms; and in processing plants, women dominate the workforce.
- In Malaysia, women account for about 10 % of the total aquaculture workforce, and they are mostly involved in freshwater aquaculture and hatchery operations for marine fish, shrimp and freshwater fish.
- In Panama, 80 % of the workforce in processing plants is women, but in the production sector only 7% of workers are women.
- In Sri Lanka, women constitute 5% of the workforce in shrimp aquaculture and 30 % of those engaged in the production and breeding of ornamental fish.

### **Gender Mainstreaming for development**

'Mainstreaming' means bringing out gender concerns in all aspects of executing policies and programmes from implementation to evaluation so that there is equality in sharing benefits.

It is now well accepted that participation of women is very important in maintaining economic growth and development. Participation does not merely mean involvement, it means ensuring equal access to all the productive resources required for production. It requires empowering women and investing in women competencies. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) considers that feminisation has serious implications for the producers' economic agency and productivity and farm income. Provided the same access to productive resources as men in the world, farm yields could be raised by 20–30%, thereby increasing the overall

agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4%. Besides increasing women's income, this gain in production could lessen hunger in the world by 12–17%.

In the context of fisheries, the issues are much more complex as fisherwomen are excluded from some of the activities in the sector. Even after making significant contributions to households as well as communities, they are marginalized. This is mainly because of poor access to and control over productive resources. There is also need to improve their participation in decision making and governance of fisheries as a whole. What is easily accessible to the men are often not available to women due to social, cultural, political and economic reasons. Overcoming these may not be easy but affirmative policies can ensure that changes are brought about. Most fisheries in the developing world are small scale. And in this context the community's place in the fisheries development context is important. The FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication adopted in 2015 clearly states 'Gender equality and equity' as fundamental to any development and has stated it as a guiding principle.

#### **Some gender concepts**

- Gender has been defined as 'a concept that refers to the social differences, as opposed to the biological ones, between women and men that have been learned, are changeable over time and have wide variations both within and between cultures.
- Gender equity refers to the process of fair and justice treatment of women and men to reach gender equality.
- Gender equality refers to the equal enjoyment by women and men or boys and girls of rights, opportunities, services and resources.
- Gender analysis is the systematic attempt to identify key issues contributing to gender inequalities so that they can be properly addressed.
- Gender analysis provides the basis for gender mainstreaming and is described as 'the study of differences in the conditions, needs, participation rates, access to resources and development, control of assets, decision-making powers, etc., between women and men in their assigned gender roles'.

Source: <http://www.rflp.org/> (Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia)]

Fisheries related natural resources like seas, rivers, lakes, ponds etc, are common property resources. In effect there is no restriction on use, though traditions and conventions usually regulate access. National and regional agreements can also restrict access. Aquaculture ponds are

privately owned and in most cases the owners are men. Where traditional rights are exercised, women do not figure in the decision making process. Most decisions are taken by the men in the community. Access also therefore is governed by men. This is one reason why there are very few women who actually venture into the sea for fishing. The fishing that women carry out is smaller in scale and operation and at best supportive in nature. Fisheries Development activities that focus on increasing fish production also thus are male centric. That there are women fishing in inshore waters and any development activity that is carried along the shore will have an impact on their activity is hardly ever noticed. An off-shoot has been that many activities performed by women have become excluded or banned when planning and policy making on fisheries management are formulated. Ownership and inheritance of land and of major fishing implements is also through men.

Traditionally, net making was a women centric activity. While the men went fishing, women made and mended the fishing nets, Mechanization of the netting yarn and net making process has played a part in reducing the role of women in net mending. The increasing size and type of nets has also made women leave the sector. Now fishermen themselves are engaged in making and repairing of the gear. Mechanization of craft and gear has resulted in the 'economic displacement' of many fish wives.

Credit is another important resource that determines the scale of operation of any enterprise. Rural credit has always been dominated by informal sources. In fisheries craft and gear; and marketing activities are all financed by large scale traders or auctioneers. Women find it extremely difficult to find credit support for their activities. Women usually get access to credit through their husbands or other male relatives, because of the interdependency between trade and finance. However, credit availed by women for specific activities are sometimes seen diverted for household requirements. Women fish traders usually face high costs of transportation, fluctuating prices and travel during odd hour's transportation. Very poor facilities also leads to health problems. Competition from male fish retailers is also high. Men generally own vehicles and transportation is easier.

One of the most important ways of improving the levels of participation of women is by improving access to the resources that were described earlier. State level policy instruments are necessary to achieve



this. Community traditions are difficult to change but requirements under law need to be followed. Specific laws to include women in community decision making bodies will be a starting point. The passing of the Panchayati Raj Act in India resulted in the dramatic increase in number of women in local self-governance. Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) have improved access to credit in many countries. Through SHGs women in small units come together and get engaged in productive activities by promoting savings and providing short term loans at lower rates of interest. At a larger scale Cooperatives can perform the same role.

Equal access to skill development and technology in fisheries are also important in gender mainstreaming. Technological innovations in harvest sector have been responsible for transforming fisheries sector from a traditional subsistence to a commercial level. The use of labour saving technology is always gender specific and has differential impacts. Since women are predominant in post harvest activities related technologies can play a major role in their empowerment. Better technologies for handling, curing and drying and processing of fish have helped women improve their incomes. The technology development process is generally gender neutral. However, it must take into account the ability of the women in handling or using the technology.

### **The way forward**

Fisheries like all other primary production sectors are undergoing changes. The impacts of mechanization, climate change, natural disasters etc. are all serious concerns in the sector. Women in fisheries contribute significantly to household incomes however their control over the same is a challenge. Conditions of work need improvement in tune with changes in all other spheres of life. Skills need to be developed to make them capable of adapting to the technological changes. Organising is another way of trying to achieve common goals and need to be encouraged by both Governments and NGOs. However, it must be ensured that in the process of 'inclusion' of women in more areas of fisheries should not result in increasing the burden of already existing roles.

### **Further reading:**

Asian Fisheries Science 25s Special Issue (2012), *Gender In Aquaculture And Fisheries: Moving The Agenda Forward*

Asian Fisheries Science 27s Special Issue (2014), *Gender In Aquaculture And Fisheries: Navigating Change*

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