



36 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

An FAO review dated November 2021 of the 2012 Hidden Harvest Report concluded that small-scale and subsistence fisheries provide livelihood to 113 million people, of whom around 40 per cent are women. According to the report, these women are present in pre-harvest (gear fabrication and boat building), harvest, post-harvest (processing and trade), and subsistence fishing. However, their informal and unpaid activities consistently get under-reported.

The work of women in small-scale fisheries can be very varied. While their post-harvest roles are better acknowledged, women's direct involvement in fish harvesting for both nutritional security as well as incomes, is increasingly being uncovered and documented. In India, from the northernmost regions of Jammu and Kashmir, where women fish snow trout and harvest water chestnuts, to its southern most states where, for example, in husband-wife teams, women use gillnets in the backwaters in Kerala or dive to the seafloor to harvest seaweed in Tamil Nadu, women's labour is the backbone of poor, fishery-dependent families. While the fishing practices are varied, they have two common traits: they are traditional to the communities, and they are vital for survival in the subsistence fishing economies.

Women also provide critical support to men in fisheries. The experience of fishing communities from Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar demonstrates the significance of women's vital roles, whether it is in maintaining fishing gear or participating in the onshore activities of fish sorting, processing and trading. Fish harvest alone, without women's labour in these vital support tasks, would be stripped of value. These activities, however, do not get counted in official fisheries statistics. It requires specialised surveys by the FAO in its 'The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture' (SOFIA) reports to reveal that women's work on the aggregate is nearly half of all work in the small-scale fisheries.

While the challenges that women face are theirs alone, often the burdens of men and families also fall upon women's shoulders. A study in Philippines documented how women equally suffered when the menfolk, be they husbands or sons, faced harassment and exploitation aboard sea vessels. When men suffered losses, or were denied wages on various pretexts, women had to bear the burden of keeping the family afloat with their earnings. They could not afford to buckle under, given the responsibility they had of managing the household and its needs. The experience of several fisheries communities during the COVID-19 pandemic was further testimony to women's resilience in facing up to adversities.

The resilience of women fishers does not stop with adversities alone. They are also often innovators and entrepreneurs. In the coastal villages of Kuching, Sarawak, women without any formal qualifications run food businesses, survey market prices and manage their fish trade. They have proved that with some public support they can be the agents for change in their small fishing communities. We come round here to the central issue: the role of women being made invisible in all enumeration of fisheries statistics, and therefore their absence largely from the planning agenda for the states. In a world riven by strife and inequality, vulnerable communities suffer the most; women in these communities are the ones who need to be empowered to play leadership roles. This is an important message for consideration in this March edition of Yemaya. ❏



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Do women fish?

Case studies from India highlight the vital but little-recognised role that women play as fishers

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It is now acknowledged that women account for 50 per cent of the workforce in fisheries and aquaculture, especially when we take into account their work in post-harvest activities like processing and trading. The findings of the 'Illuminating Hidden Harvests' report show that, globally, about one in four workers in small-scale fisheries are women. However, women, especially in developing countries, face substantive challenges to engaging in and benefitting equitably from these sectors. Several studies have pointed out that they have poor access to and control of resources. Also, in India, women are losing out on the traditional access rights they had on landed fish due to factors like mechanisation of fishing vessels. Further, deep-seated patriarchal, cultural and social norms limit their engagement. Most of women's work

is in the form of unpaid family labour, which is seen as an extension of household reproductive roles. Incomes they earn for similar work are lower as compared to men, for example, in seafood processing or in fish vending. In dry fish processing and trade, a transition from processors/traders, to low paid and sometimes unpaid labour, is being observed. The one node in fish value chains that engages women and yet is hardly acknowledged, however, is fish harvesting. In India, about 49 per cent of the 2.5 million adult population in marine fishing communities in India, are women. Of the adult population in these communities, 81 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are reported to be employed in the sector. There are no reports of women in fish harvesting, although 58 per cent of all seed collectors are women

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Women gillnet fishers, Raigad, Maharashtra, India. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also do fishing

and a massive 74 per cent of all allied workers too, which includes work like net making and mending, marketing, curing and processing, peeling, labour, other jobs.

If we were to formally record all the jobs that women carry out in fisheries their profiles would be highly varied. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also dry excess catch or the catch that is specifically meant for drying, they smoke and ferment fish, collect seaweed and work in small-scale pre-processing and commercial processing. They also do fishing. These myriad activities are however, not captured comprehensively.

Besides all this, women bear almost all the burden of household work. A 2019 survey in India found that women (including fisherwomen) spent on average five hours and fifteen minutes in a day doing domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing. And one third of the women, mostly those with young children, spend on average another two hours and seventeen minutes every day caring for and instructing children: seven and a half hours in all. And interestingly, for women who have received higher education, the burden of such work is not significantly different than for other women.

There are no data or official records of women doing fishing. Their fishing activities are often termed 'subsistence', which, by definition, is something that is done for maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimal level. Our studies over the past few years, however, show that women do not always only carry out subsistence fishing. Their activities ensure nutritional security as well as additional incomes, and the women themselves consider fishing as their distinct livelihood activity.

In our studies we have documented several cases where women are engaged in reservoir based fish harvest. Reservoirs are large inland water resources that can help increase fish production. Since the main function of reservoirs is usually power generation or irrigation, reservoir based fishing is generally considered a spin-off, secondary activity. Reservoirs are stocked with fish by the Department of Fisheries of the respective states, and fishing rights are leased either to individuals or cooperative societies. Coracle fishing or fishing using small canoes with gear such as gillnets is commonly seen. Generally, fishing is carried out by husband-wife teams and up to 80 per cent of household income comes from this activity. Since equal effort is expended, half of this income is the direct contribution of the women.

Lakes and rivers are important inland water bodies too. In Wular Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, women carry out fishing of snow trouts

and common carps, and harvest water chestnut locally called trapa for their livelihoods. The fish is either sold fresh or processed and is in high demand especially during winters. In Loktak Lake in the north-eastern part of India, women use small canoes for fishing using dip nets, scoop nets and traps fabricated using locally available bamboo. The fish is marketed locally.

As in the case of lakes and rivers, fishing in India's coastal backwaters and estuaries has also been documented. In the southern state of Kerala, husband-wife teams carry out fishing using gillnets in the Vembanad backwaters. The marketing is undertaken by the husband, but the wife is an equal partner in all other tasks.

In Raigad, Maharashtra, women along with men engage in single-day gillnet fishing in estuaries, fishing at depths of between three to five fathoms (about 5.5 to 9 metres) and harvest ribbon fish, shrimps, mullets, croakers, and golden anchovy. Women are solely responsible for marketing either in their villages or in faraway markets, depending on the volume of catches.

Bheels are unique to the north-eastern part of the country. These are flood plain wetlands, low-lying areas bordering large rivers, which are seasonally inundated by the overspill from the main river. Women in large numbers engage in fishing using unique dip nets, sometimes reaching the shallow fishing grounds in canoes. These bheels are dominated by nutrient-rich small fishes, ensuring the nutritional security of the households of these women. These fish are an important constituent of the diet of the people in the region and are rich in nutrients.

The pokkali fields are part of the wetland ecosystem typical in Kerala. These are lands where the alternate 'rice-fish system' has been traditionally practised. The fish/shrimp culture that takes place alternately with rice production utilises a natural filtration process. Of late farmers have also been stocking these farms. These lands are open to whoever wishes to fish on it once one crop is harvested and before the second is taken up. Generally women (and very few men) glean or fish and shrimp from these fields. They use small indigenous scoop nets for harvesting, following the lunar cycle to decide on when to fish (fishing close to the full moon and new moon days). Daily fishing can extend up to six hours, in neck deep water. Feeder canals to these lands are also potential sources of fish, where the women carry out the activity when the lands, during the cropping season, are declared out of bounds. The fish is used for household consumption, with the excess being marketed fresh.

Women working in groups also use indigenous gear like coconut leaves for fishing in these areas, collecting the fish by dragging the fronds in the water and handpicking the fish. Again in the northeastern parts of the country,

Women are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work

we see dip nets being used on the margins of paddy fields for fishing. Women in groups also travel to a neighbouring district and fish in paddy fields, ditches and other waterlogged areas. They go out in groups, fish for about five hours, and then proceed to the market to sell the catch. Groups comprising young and older women from local fisher communities in Raigad, Maharashtra, glean oysters, gastropods and crabs from inshore waters and creeks, using curved blades on a wooden handle. Women from Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu in South India, for decades have dived into the waters to harvest seaweed. Seaweed farming is in fact extensively carried out by women.

These are just some examples from among several thousands of women, engaged in fishing in India but who are not licenced fishers. Women

are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work. Women's work makes significant contributions to household incomes and nutritional security. Women are also a major workforce in fish harvesting across the country. Prevailing estimates of 33 per cent of women being part of the workforce therefore need realistic revision. The impact of different stressors is different on men and women; this needs to be recognised too. Gender should be central to policy development and all women in the sector should be recognised as fishworkers. A comprehensive census to generate on-the-ground factual information on women and their contributions must be taken up. ❏



PROFILE

Amplifying women's voices: Margaret Nakato's important work in organising women in small-scale fisheries in Uganda has received international recognition

By **Sivaja Nair** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Executive, ICSF, India

Margaret Nakato, Executive Director of the Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT), Uganda, was awarded the prestigious Margarita Lizárraga Medal for the biennium 2020-2021, at the launch event of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture in November 2019. This medal is the latest among the many accolades she has received in recognition of her efforts in organising women in fishing communities. See the article 'A well-deserved award' in this issue of *Yemaya* for the full text of Margaret Nakato's acceptance speech.

Margaret began to associate with the cause of women in fisheries after witnessing the catastrophic socio-economic changes brought about by the increased catch and export of Nile perch to Europe from Katosi landing site, Uganda, in the mid-1990s. Soaring export rates and sharp declines in access to fisheries resources for the local fish vendors, especially women, resulted in the loss of their jobs. Margaret watched in helplessness as many of the powerful, proud and financially independent women in her family and community faced livelihood loss and fell into the trap of poverty. Looking for alternate sources that would bring income into the lives of these women, Margaret began to realise that their strength lay in organising themselves to sustain their living and to secure their rights to engage in fisheries. .

Thus, in 1996, in collaboration with a group of women, Margaret formed Katosi Women

Fishing Group, which subsequently became Katosi Women Development Trust, to coordinate the increasing organisation of women's groups in the community. The Trust supports women, especially from isolated fishing communities, to strengthen engagement in fisheries and other economic activities through access to productive resources, knowledge and skills to improve on their lives.

Right from its inception, KWDT has been involved in multidimensional aspects of development, increasing access to basic social needs such as water and sanitation, knowledge and skill empowerment of women to make informed choices and secure livelihood, and tenure rights. Margaret has been collaborating with governments at local and national levels and with international agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in formulating and implementing gender-just and sustainable policies influencing the lives of men and women in small-scale fisheries. Margaret believes that there is still a dearth of recognition of women's needs – access to basic amenities, governance of natural resources and risk aversion mechanisms that would help them avoid cycles of deprivation.

Margaret calls for direct investment and collaboration in support of women fishworkers on a broad spectrum of development issues to secure their roles in the sector. She believes that the way for inclusive development is through organised structures at national and international coalitions, and urges women to make their voices heard and fight for their space in the policy making sphere.

Margaret holds a Master of Science degree in development management funded through the Commonwealth Foundation scholarship. She lives in Kampala with her family, including four children, and continues to champion the cause of small-scale fisheries. ❏