

CHANGING TRADITIONS: A SUMMARY REPORT ON THE FIRST GLOBAL LOOK AT THE GENDER DIMENSIONS OF FISHERIES

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In Penang, famous for its seafood and maritime history, and located right in the heart of Asia, the Asian Fisheries Society and the WorldFish Center conducted the first ever Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries on 1-2 December 2004. The symposium, held in conjunction with the Seventh Asian Fisheries Forum, attracted 30 papers by over 100 authors and strong audience discussions covering countries from Kiribati, through Asia Pacific, Africa, and Europe to the Arctic. The flavor of the symposium was of changing traditions and awakening to the contributions of different people to fisheries.

Fishing and aquaculture are usually pictured as occupations or recreations of men—hauling nets and lines in dangerous seas, piloting fishing boats, constructing fish ponds and cages and negotiating with fish traders and fisheries officials. Throughout the world, what these pictures miss are the contributions and roles of women, youths and even children. Studies and closer observation of fisheries and communities are starting to put together descriptions, stories and hard statistics on the contributions of these other segments of our societies. The invisible groups, in fact, may contribute more economically than the traditionally recognized fishers. While scientists may still have a long way to go to substantiate such a conclusion, the discussions at the Global Symposium pointed the way forward to understanding the full human dimensions of fisheries and how they are starting to change.

Valuing the Economic Contributions to Fisheries

Figures on employment and income in fisheries typically only count direct fishing work that leads to cash payments or fish production for home consumption. This overlooks the unpaid work such as net mending and help with boat-building that women do, often, as in rural Philippines, as part of their marital obligations.

Irene Novaczek and Jean Mitchell in their paper entitled “Constructing realities: documenting women’s fisheries in the Pacific Islands”, noted that we should do away with gender stereotyping. Women’s activities in fisheries are often regarded as low-value versus men’s activities which are considered high-value. These assumptions are reflective of western, industrial values that are rooted in dichotomous patterns of analysis which leads to gender discrimination.

Chao Nai-Hsien of the Taiwan Fisheries Research Institute tracked down successful women entrepreneurs for her research on “Women’s involvement in processing and the globalization of processing in fisheries and aquaculture in Taiwan” and found that their businesses largely employed women and showed great creativity in developing new products and markets, including global markets. The businesses were mainly in post-harvest products, ranging from high-end pearl and coral items to convenience foods and surprising new foods such as mooncakes containing tuna bellies. The businesses often combined the basics of post-harvest fisheries food products with new directions in artwork, gourmet, use of byproducts and fashion. Many of the businesses are global and nearly all use the Internet extensively.

The symposium also heard how, in European, Philippine and Pacific studies, women tended not to view their efforts as “work” but rather saw them as family obligations. Katia Frangoudes, of the University of Brest (France) who presented a paper on “Legal recognition of women’s contribution in fisheries and aquaculture in the European Union”, noted that “a few women in our European studies found that learning to understand and value their efforts as work, in the full economic sense, raised their status in the family and raised their own self-confidence”. Similar results are shown by the study conducted by Marieta Banez-Sumagaysay of the University of the Philippines in the Visayas, on “Gender stratification in fish production systems: women do have economic power” where she mentioned that although women’s various forms of fisheries labor are strategically indispensable (both a positive and a negative factor for the women and the family), basic training in business and technical skills could increase women’s monetary contribution to the family and community incomes.

Another economic consequence of excluding or overlooking women, youths and children in fisheries matters comes from the breakdown of local fishing rules, if the knowledge of these groups is left out. Irene Novaczek of the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada presented the paper “Gender and generation: crucial aspects of local fisheries management on Lelepa Island, Vanuatu” which she co-authored with Jean Tarisesei. When the chiefs of the island of Lelepa in Vanuatu set up protected areas without consulting women and male youths, this led to breakdowns in the protected areas system. The youths were openly defiant of the fishing bans and the women were led, in desperation, to fish illegally as the location of the protected areas made their inshore fishing nearly impossible to carry out.

Human Dimensions of Fisheries Regulations, Policies and Institutions

Surprisingly, well-meaning policies and regulations can often ignore the human side of those who work under them. An International Labour Organization – Department for International Development study conducted by Md. Nazmul Ahsan and co-workers on the “Alternative livelihood options for female workers in shrimp processing industries in Bangladesh” noted that European Union-certified seafood processing plants in Bangladesh showed that while the plants met the product quality requirements using Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point management (HACCP), many were not careful of the conditions under which employees, mainly women, worked on the factory floor. Workers often spent extended periods standing in chilled waters in order to fulfill the requirements for top quality export shrimp.

Significantly in this context, a study by D.A.M. De Silva and Mashiro Yamao on “The involvement of female labor in seafood processing in Sri Lanka: impact of organizational fairness and supervisor evaluation on employee commitment” showed that women’s perceptions of workplace fairness and justice had the greatest impact on whether these educated but low-

paid workers were committed to their work. Commitment is an essential requirement to create quality products.

Trade policies, national fisheries codes and international fisheries instruments often pay little attention to gender. Jovelyn Cleofe in her presentation “Looking for women in Philippine fisheries policies: research to determine advocacy points for fisheries” reported that, in the Philippines, action research with women in the fisheries sector had generated the concept of developing a “Magna Carta for Women” aimed, among several objectives, to get greater formal representation of women in local level fishing management bodies.

In Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita, Solomon Islands, women have traditionally been involved with the preparation and sale of shell money. Fidali-Hickle and Whippey-Morris described in their presentation “No shells, no langalanga: hard times in Malaita, Solomon Islands” how the decreased demand for shell money in their hometown led to the need for women to leave their home to travel to Honiara to sell their products. Their absence from home often led to quarrels with their husbands and even to divorce.

In the Canadian far north, Joanna Kafarowski of the University of North British Columbia, in her study “Valuing local knowledge in the Canadian Arctic: how the involvement of local peoples results in relevant resource management decisions” found that Nunavut women were rarely represented in the local Hunters and Trappers Organizations and on the co-management councils at higher levels.

According to the study “Women in fish border trade: the case of fish trade between Cambodia and Thailand” by Kyoko Kusakabe of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and co-authors, Cambodian women in the cross-border trade of fish from Tonle Sap into Thailand are caught in a squeeze between the merchants handling the fish from Cambodia and the border authorities and business people such as transport operators. The traders, almost all of whom are women, would benefit from more equitable trade arrangements, such as realistic and transparent tariff schedules that are implemented predictably. The women traders also have no links with the management of Tonle Sap fisheries. The vulnerability of the women makes them targets for pressures from all parties in the border supply chain.

This theme, the difficulties of women fish traders, was repeated in other papers. For example, in Kiribati, Maere Tekanene in her paper “The women fish traders of Tarawa, Kiribati” reported that women fish traders labor under the most basic of conditions, paying their market fees but receiving few services in return. In Bangladesh, Sadeka Salim and Md. Kawser Ahmed, a sociologist of the University of Dhaka, in their paper “Women and fisheries in Bangladesh: level of involvement and scope for enhancement” recommended that the emerging group of women fish traders would be assisted in the market place if they were deliberately allocated some space, rather than have to compete with the well-established male traders.

Mainstreaming Gender Considerations in All Fisheries Activities

Globalization, booming seafood markets and declining fisheries resources are driving changes in traditions in the fisheries sector. The symposium recognized the breadth and depth of changes needed to create a gender-sensitive fisheries sector and make real improvements in the lives of those involved.

The Honorable B.A. Dada, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of Nigeria, who attended the symposium, stressed the importance of governments not leaving out a significant percentage of the population from economic activity. Countries need not just policies, but also strategies to implement the policies for sustainable development of fisheries and economic empowerment of women.

The regional Mekong River Commission's Fisheries Program has an official policy to mainstream gender, according to Napaporn Sriputinibondh of the Thailand Department of Fisheries. In her presentation "Gender mainstreaming in Mekong fisheries: from policy to practice" which she co-authored with others, she noted the major shift underpinning this policy—a shift from women as the target of welfare help, to gender equity as the desired outcome.

M.C. Nandeesh in his paper "Gender status in Indian fisheries education, research and development organizations" reported on major studies of gender in Indian universities, and fisheries research and technical organizations. Overall, women's participation is low, for example, only 18% of graduates from university fisheries courses and 14% of researchers in the national fisheries research system are women. Yet women have reached some high positions and several have world-class research reputations. Women's participation rates vary by state and are linked to female literacy and social status. Kerala, with the highest literacy rate in India, tops most tables. In the Kerala Fisheries College, women comprised 70% on average of the top 10 fisheries graduates from 1995 to 2003. To achieve greater gender equity will need sensitization of senior leaders, a curriculum that is more gender sensitive and action on the support facilities for women in the education system, including ensuring their physical security.

To address gender sensitization in university curricula, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai has created a course on this topic for agricultural students and is delivering this in collaboration with the Kerala Agriculture University. Such curricula are needed in fisheries education also. Within organizations delivering gendered programs, such as CARE-Bangladesh, a gender-sensitive workplace has been created to support the delivery.

Other economic sectors appear to be more advanced in mainstreaming gender than is fisheries and the symposium attendees recognized that lessons could be learned from agriculture and forestry.

Another form of mainstreaming is bringing the fisheries sector into the health, education and other empowerment programs of the wider community. This is being done with respect to baseline nutrition studies in India under the National Agriculture Technology Program, reported by Vijaya Khader et al. in their paper "Nutritional status and socioeconomic empowerment of fisherwomen in the coastal ecosystem of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu". More than 70% of the women were anemic, even though about 60% of earnings were spent on food. Discrimination against girls in terms of nutrition and education varied with the educational level of parents. In Kerala, where literacy levels for both women and men are higher than in other parts of the country, such discrimination is gradually being eliminated from the society. Stella Williams et al. in their paper "Fishing: what has HIV/AIDS got to do with it?" reported on efforts in southern Nigeria to educate rural fishing communities that HIV/AIDS is not only a disease of the cities; students and nongovernmental organizations have been mobilized to visit and educate the fishing communities. In northeast Thailand, Leah Sullivan of AIT, in her study "The impacts of aquaculture development in relation to gender in northeastern Thailand" found that even when women benefited from the income of new cage culture operations, they still seemed to lack the mobility of men in the same communities. By using a gender lens in her studies on fisheries, she revealed more general questions on women's empowerment.

Strengthening the Basis of Gender and Fisheries Research

The emerging field of "gender and fisheries research" still has a long way to go in terms of accepted and rigorous methods. Emerging only in the 1990s as a descriptive enterprise, it is only now starting to stimulate original research studies. It is not well connected to the more established fields of gender and development research but is gaining greater acceptance in fisheries research as shown by the focus at the Asian Fisheries Forum. The Gender and

Fisheries Symposium was among one of the more popular topics, capturing sufficient papers for a full two-day event.

The symposium debated the difficulty of distinguishing research, action research and advocacy in gender and fisheries work. To be academically respectable, distinctions are essential. Yet, in separating the different professional engagements, the attendees felt that close links were desirable so that relevant policy and management results were able to be immediately taken up. The field of gender and fisheries research was emerging in response to the perceived need for action.

At this early stage, gender and fisheries research was seen to be in need of more rigorous methods to address the research questions. Much data were gathered using standard social science methods such as focus group discussions, semi-structured questionnaires and household surveys. Further exploration of the best ways to use such instruments in gender studies was needed. In addition, most quantitative studies suffered from lack of sex-disaggregated background statistics. Sex-disaggregated data should be encouraged in national data collections as well as in research.

If gender and fisheries is to become a respectable field of academic endeavor, it will need to generate undergraduate and postgraduate university programs, recognized research methodologies and academic status as well as recognition for its impacts and utility to the betterment of people's lives. Already, among fisheries specialists, gender and fisheries is starting to be seen as a serious topic and the Asian Fisheries Society and the WorldFish Center have really shown a strong role through the triennial forums, this being the third forum to feature women/gender symposia.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The symposium challenged researchers to find out what they can do to help the world understand the gender dimensions of fisheries. The target is to help those involved in the fisheries sector—fish workers, their families, fisheries policymakers, nongovernmental agencies and technical experts—to create new opportunities and solve current problems.

The symposium provided new views and insights, and the open discussion at the end settled on four principal directions for future action: to investigate in depth the economic contributions of all segments of fishing communities; to put human dimensions into all formal fisheries regulations, policies and plans; to bring gender considerations into the mainstream of all fisheries activities, from fishing to the organization of research; and to support these actions by strengthening the basis of gender and fisheries research.

The Global Gender and Fisheries Symposium made a start by highlighting the economic contributions of all genders and ages to fisheries. Much more needs to be done to understand how gender affects the operations of the sector and what actions and policies could bring change for the better in the empowerment of the different groups. The symposium concluded that researchers needed to study, in more detail, the contributions of all segments of communities to different fisheries to create the basis for a better understanding. Beyond research, fisheries regulations, policies and plans would be enhanced by embedding gender and other human dimensions. Overall, the sector needs to mainstream gender in all activities, starting with the gender sensitization of organizations dealing with fisheries and including all fisheries programs and support. Gender and fisheries research is a nascent field of academic work and one that is grappling with its linkages to policy development and action. Its basis needs to be better developed through synergies with other academic fields concerned with gender and development and by greater attention to relevant and rigorous research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, the latter having regard to good sex-disaggregated data. The symposium discussion concluded that women in the fisheries sector are up against advocacy-formidable challenges from language difficulties, lack of funds and lack of representation.