

# Changing Traditions: First Global Look at the Gender Dimensions of Fisheries

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The Asian Fisheries Society and the WorldFish Center conducted the first ever Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries in Penang, Malaysia, from 30 November to 4 December 2004. The two-day Symposium, held in conjunction with the 7th Asian Fisheries Forum, attracted 30 papers by over 100 authors and strong audience discussions that covered countries from Kiribati, through Asia Pacific, Africa, Europe and to the Arctic. The flavor of the Symposium was of changing traditions and recognition of the contributions of different groups 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. 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 society. These invisible groups may, in fact, contribute more in economic terms than the traditionally recognized fishers. While more data is needed to support this view, the discussions at the Global Symposium pointed the way to understanding the full human dimensions of fisheries and how they are changing.

The challenge before the Symposium was to specify what researchers can do to help the world understand the gender dimensions of fisheries. The aim was to help those involved in the fisheries sector - the fisheries workers, their families, the fisheries

policy makers, non-government agencies and technical experts - to create new opportunities and solve current problems.

The Symposium provided new ideas and insights. The open discussion at the end converged on four main areas for future action: to investigate in depth the economic contributions of all segments of fishing communities; to put the human dimension 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 in fisheries research.

## Valuing the economic contributions to fisheries

Statistics 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 part of their marital obligations (e.g., in the Philippines). Poh Sze Choo from the WorldFish Center, said that 'surrogate pricing methods show that, in Malaysia for example, this work often amounts to more than the income from fishing of the men. In any setting, it is at least a subsidy to the price of fish - and often a subsidy from the poorer segments of society to the wealthier who eat the fish.'

Jean Mitchell and Irene Novaczek 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 that lead to gender discrimination.

Dr. Chao Nai-Hsien of the Taiwan Fisheries Research Institute tracked down successful women entrepreneurs for her study 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 foods, 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. According to Katia Frangouides of the University of Brest (France) '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 studies by Marieta Banez-Sumagaysay of the University of the Philippines in the Visayas. Although their various contributions to fisheries are strategically indispensable and are both a positive and a negative factor for the women and their families, 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 is the breakdown of local fishing rules if the knowledge held by these groups is ignored. Irene Novaczek of the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada reported that when the chiefs of the island of Lelepa in Vanuatu set up protected areas without consulting the women and male youths, it led to the breakdown of the protected areas system. The youths were openly defiant of the fishing bans and the women were forced to fish illegally as the location of the protected areas made it impossible for them to fish inshore.

### Human dimensions of fisheries regulations, policies and institutions

Well-meaning policies and regulations can often ignore the human side of people whom they affect. An ILO-DFID study of EU-certified seafood processing plants in Bangladesh showed that while the plants met the product quality requirements using HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) management, 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 water in order to fulfill the quality requirements for shrimp exports.

A study by D.A.M. De Silva and Mashiro Yamao on Sri Lankan seafood export processing plants 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 paid little attention to gender. Jovelyn Cleofe 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 to get greater formal

representation of women in local level fishing management bodies as one of its objectives. The Symposium discussion concluded that women in the fisheries sector face formidable challenges due to language difficulties, lack of funds and lack of representation.

In Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita, Solomon Islands, women have traditionally been involved in the preparation and sale of shell money. Fidali-Hickle and Whippey-Morris described how the declining demand for shell money in their hometown meant they had 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 found that Nunavut women were rarely represented in the local Hunters and Trappers Organizations or at higher levels of the co-management councils.

According to studies by Kyoko Kusakabe of the Asian Institute of Technology, Cambodian women in the cross border trade of fish from Tonle Sap into Thailand are at the mercy of the merchants handling the fish in Cambodia, 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 of the difficulties faced by women fish traders was repeated in other papers. For example Maere Tekanene reported that in Kiribati women fish traders work under the most basic of conditions, paying their market fees but receiving few services in return. In Bangladesh, Md Kawser Ahmed, a sociologist of the University of Dhaka,

recommended that the emerging group of women fish traders could be assisted by being allocated some space in the markets rather than having to compete with the well-established male traders.

### Mainstreaming gender considerations in all fisheries activities

Globalization, booming seafood markets and declining fisheries resources are causing changes in traditions in the fisheries sector. However, the Symposium recognized that more profound changes are required to create a gender-sensitive fisheries sector and make real improvements in the lives of those involved. The occupations within the sector are many and diverse, from repairing fishing boats to catching fish, culturing them, processing and marketing them and managing natural resources, to fisheries managers, researchers and educationists.

The Honorable B.A. Dada, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of Nigeria, 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 the gender issue, according to Napaporn Sriputinibondh of the Thailand Department of Fisheries. 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 reported on major studies on gender in Indian universities, fisheries research and technical organizations. Overall, women's participation is low with women accounting for only 18% of graduates from university fisheries courses and 14% of researchers in the national fisheries research system. Yet women have reached some high positions and several

have excellent 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 Kerala, 70% of the top 10 fisheries graduates have been women. To achieve greater gender equity will need sensitization of senior leaders, curricula that are more gender sensitive and better 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 for students of agriculture and is delivering this in collaboration with the Kerala Agriculture University. Such curricula are needed in fisheries education also. Within organizations delivering gender-based programs, such as CARE-Bangladesh, a gender-sensitive workplace has been created to support their delivery.

Other economic sectors appear to be more advanced than the fisheries sector in mainstreaming gender issues and the Symposium attendees recognized that lessons could be learned from agriculture and forestry. Gender issues in the fisheries sector attract specialists from other disciplines, such as sociology and human health.

The Asian Fisheries Society should encourage special session conveners to include papers on gender issues in as many theme sessions as possible, e.g., co-management, aquaculture, stock enhancement, shark and ray fisheries, so that the particular gender issues are highlighted to more specialist audiences. Another way to bring the issue into the mainstream is to bring the fisheries sector into the health, education and other empowerment programs of the wider community. Vijaya Khadar reported that this is being done in the baseline nutrition studies in India under the National Agriculture Technology Program for the southern Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. It was found that more than 70%

of the women were anemic, even though about 60% of the earnings were spent on food. The level of discrimination against girl children in terms of nutrition and education depended on the educational level of the parents. In Kerala, with literacy levels for both women and men higher than in other parts of India, such discrimination is being gradually eliminated from the society.

Stella Williams also reported on efforts in southern Nigeria to educate rural fishing communities that HIV/AIDS is not only a disease of the cities. Students and NGOs have been mobilized to visit and educate fishing communities. Leah Sullivan of AIT found that in northeast Thailand, 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. Thus, by using a gender lens in her studies on fisheries, she revealed more general issues on the empowerment of women.

### **Strengthen 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 using accepted and rigorous methods and its linkages with other fields of research in fisheries and in gender studies. It emerged in the 1990s largely in a descriptive form. It is now starting to become more scientific. 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 very popular and received sufficient papers for a full two-day event.

Comparing gender and fisheries interests with those in other fields such as gender and development, the fisheries researchers appear to have identified the age dimension of gender (children, youths, adults) as important. Gender and development studies appear more dominated by the focus on adults. The Symposium attracted

papers focusing not only on adults in the fisheries sector, but also on children and youths.

The Symposium debated the difficulty of distinguishing research, action research and advocacy, in gender and fisheries work. To be academically respectable, these distinctions are essential. However, it was agreed that there should be close links between these elements so that policy and management results could be immediately acted upon. The field of gender and fisheries research is emerging in response to the perceived need for action.

At this early stage, gender and fisheries research requires methods that are more rigorous. It is necessary to explore ways to use standard social science methods such as focus group discussions, semi-structured questionnaires and household surveys in gender studies. Most existing quantitative studies lack gender-disaggregated background data. National data collection systems should be encouraged to collect gender-disaggregated data.

To make gender and fisheries research a field of academic endeavor, it is necessary to develop undergraduate and postgraduate university programs, use recognized research methodology, and give it academic status and recognition for its impact on improvement of people's lives. Gender in fisheries research is becoming a serious topic for fisheries specialists. The Asian Fisheries Society and the WorldFish Center have played an important role in this through the triennial forums - this being the third forum to feature a women/gender symposium.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The Global Gender and Fisheries Symposium was successful in highlighting the economic contributions of women and children to the fisheries sector. A lot of work is needed to understand how gender affects the operations of the sector and what actions and policies

could bring about the empowerment of different groups involved in it. The conclusion of the Symposium was that researchers must study in more detail the contribution of all segments of the fishing communities. Fisheries regulations, policies and plans should be improved by the inclusion of gender and other human dimensions. The fisheries sector should introduce gender issues into organizations dealing with fisheries and fisheries programs and projects. As a topic for academic research, it should draw from other academic fields concerned with gender and development and pay greater attention to appropriate and rigorous research methods, both qualitative and quantitative.

### Recommendations to the Asian Fisheries Society

Gender and fisheries is a topic that attracts specialists from outside the fisheries sector as well as fisheries specialists. Among fisheries specialists, gender and fisheries is seen as a serious research topic and the Asian Fisheries Society is promoting efforts to make it more academically sound as well as having it adopted as part of policies and practices for socially positive impacts. The gender dimension in fisheries covers the spectrum from nutrition of babies, fishing by children and youth, work of women and men, to awareness of the issues in research organizations and universities. The Society should be strongly encouraged to continue this effort as there is still a long way to go. The following are some recommendations arising from the Global Symposium on gender and fisheries held during the 7th Asian Fisheries Forum in Penang.

*Recommendation 1:* For the 8th Asian Fisheries Forum to be held in India, the Asian Fisheries Society is requested to invite papers on gender issues to be included in as many theme sessions as possible, e.g., co-management, aquaculture, stock enhancement, shark and ray fisheries, so that the specific gender issues are presented to the relevant audiences.

*Recommendation 2:* The Asian Fisheries

Society (AFS) and the WorldFish Center to continue to support the Gender and Fisheries listserver, the only one on this topic in the world. Interested parties can register by sending an email to [p.choo@cgiar.org](mailto:p.choo@cgiar.org). The early success of the listserver to be built upon by advertising it on the AFS website and through the AFS listserver, and in fisheries magazines such as NAGA, Asian Aquaculture (by NACA), SEAFDEC magazines, INFOFISH and other similar specialist publications, including those outside the region. In terms of format, the listserver to consider providing short summaries and pointers to key gender and gender in fisheries papers in the scholarly literature. AFS and/or the WorldFish Center should consider creating a Gender and Fisheries website containing relevant source materials and links.

*Recommendation 3:* The AFS and the WorldFish Center be requested to publish the proceedings of this first Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries on a CD-ROM along with copies of the proceedings of the 1998 Chiang Mai Symposium on Asian Women in Fisheries and the 2001 Kaohsiung Global Women in Fisheries Symposium. This CD should be made available before the 7th Forum of the Indian Branch of the AFS to be held in November 2005. The proceedings should be made available on the AFS and the WorldFish websites and on the websites of other interested organizations. The two previous proceedings (1998 Chiang Mai Symposium and the 2001 Kaohsiung Symposium) can be downloaded from:

- [http://www.worldfishcenter.org/Pub\\_WIF.htm](http://www.worldfishcenter.org/Pub_WIF.htm)
- [http://www.worldfishcenter.org/Pubs/Wif/pub\\_wifglobal.htm](http://www.worldfishcenter.org/Pubs/Wif/pub_wifglobal.htm)

*Recommendation 4:* AFS to consider supporting a short training course in gender research methods in conjunction with a suitable forthcoming event such as the 7th Forum of the Indian Branch of the AFS in Bangalore in November 2005.

*Recommendation 5:* The AFS is encouraged to produce a basic handbook of how to incorporate gender issues into fisheries

research and development projects and programs to bring gender awareness to scientists working in all branches of fisheries science.

*Recommendation 6:* In conjunction with the 7th Forum of the Indian Branch of the AFS, a one-day meeting be convened of Indian women fisheries professionals. Key senior Indian research, education and development leaders should be encouraged to sponsor and attend this meeting.

*Recommendation 7:* At the 8th AFF, a special 'best paper' award should be established for the gender and fisheries theme. In addition, the AFS could consider making an annual award for the best gender and fisheries publication in a research journal.

*Recommendation 8:* The AFS should consider canvassing key donor agencies (e.g., IFS, IDRC, ACIAR, CIDA, USIAD, DFID) with a view to establishing a small grant program for gender and fisheries. The grant scheme should have two to three eminent gender researchers and one to two eminent fisheries researchers with interest on gender issues as advisors. The WorldFish Center should be requested to administer the scheme on behalf of the Society.

*Recommendation 9:* To identify the top researchers in gender issues and get them interested and involved in gender issues in fisheries. These scholars could help the AFS further develop the field of research on gender and fisheries and its methodology. They could help to clarify the processes of research, action research, advocacy, policy advice and development with a view to developing the field of gender and fisheries research to improve the lives of people in the fisheries sector.

*Recommendation 10:* All attendees of the 7th AFF Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries should help promote the Symposium through seminars – based on the above report of the Symposium – within their agencies and by inviting more contributors and authors to present papers at the 8th AFF.