Apart from many household tasks which are considered as exclusively women’s duties, women in Southeast Asia have participated in social and economic activities such as education, agriculture and fisheries, business and industry, as well as producing handicraft and managing cottage industries to supplement family income.

In terms of agricultural and fishing activities, many women are the heads of their households who bring up and educate their children, and make a living for the entire family. Even if the head of the household is a man, usually the woman holds the power because she manages the household’s resources. Women also share the decision-making authority with their husbands.

In the fisheries sub-sector, women participate in almost all activities including preparation of meals, fishing materials, and processing the fish. Some help with the construction of fishing gears, fishing boats, fish sorting, fish handling, fish processing, etc. Some women even participate directly in fishing activities with their family members in open lakes, rivers and streams. Women almost exclusively operate fish selling.

Although women are involved in almost all activities of society, very little data has been recorded or studied, especially in the fishing industry. Therefore, women do not receive adequate working conditions and facilities or training and exchange of information. Women’s invaluable and important contribution to fishing and related activities is often forgotten or overlooked and their problems are often not seen.

Major problems facing women in fisheries in the Mekong Region
Many of the landless women in the Mekong Region are the poorest of the poor women in fisheries. Various social problems underline the plight of some unfortunate and indigent women in fisheries along both sides of the Mekong River. The wide spectrum of problems faced include:

i. Lack of basic education and training targeting women in fisheries activities, particularly related to fish processing and marketing;

ii. Training and extension are not gender sensitive and there is a need for appropriate extension programs which truly meet the needs of women in fisheries;

iii. Few women are promoted in the government sector;

iv. Mass media is not sufficiently employed to improve the quality of life in rural communities in a holistic manner; and

v. Changes in the role of women in fisheries brought about by mechanization and commercialization of both capture fisheries and aquaculture.
Government officials at high levels are addressing some of these issues. Quite a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) show interest, but their diverse efforts are not coordinated as a whole. There is a need to create a mechanism to do this on national and regional levels in the Lower Mekong Basin.

Initiatives of PADEK in recognition of problems facing women in fisheries
Considering the major problems faced by women in fisheries, the Partnership for Development in Kampuchea (PADEK) initiated the first Workshop on Women in Cambodian Fisheries in 1994 at the Bati Fisheries Station in Prey Veng Province. In October 1995, PADEK organized a Photographic Competition on Women in Asian Fisheries during the Fourth Asian Fisheries Forum held in Beijing, China. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) won the first prize, and their photograph was chosen to be on the cover of the AFF Proceedings (November 1998). Then in March 1996, PADEK arranged a Regional Seminar on Women in Fisheries in Indo-China Countries, in Phnom Penh with the participation of women (and men) from Cambodia, Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Thailand, Vietnam, and several agencies and non-governmental organizations. During this event, a list of important recommendations was drawn up.

Round table discussion on women in fisheries
Although many recommendations were made at the regional seminar addressing the plight of women in fisheries in the Indo-China countries, the women at the national level could not put most of them in practice. Therefore, the MRC Fisheries Programme and the WES Aquaculture Project in Can Tho, Vietnam, jointly organized a Round Table Discussion on Women in Fisheries in the Mekong Basin in April 1997. At the meeting, each riparian country agreed to create a national network for women in fisheries.

A regional network will link these four national networks. The regional network is important for the users sharing the Mekong Basin resources. Many of the people involved in this networking exercise participated in the Fifth Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiang Mai, November 1998, which included a Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries.

The round table discussion was held to:

i. Evaluate the status of women in fisheries by exchanging information and experiences relevant to the Mekong Basin;

ii. Show how the participants can improve the lives of women in fisheries through supporting programs (i.e., training opportunities, developing management skills, providing credit and loans, offering access to open communication and information services, etc.);

iii. Facilitate the establishment of national networks (including national leagues of women in fisheries) and a regional network to coordinate basin-wide activities; and

iv. Begin drafting a systematic action plan, including both short-term actions up to November 1998 and long-term expectations (such as providing equal opportunity to participate, equal access to education, resources, credit, etc.).
Starting point
Time was spent to review, build on, and respond to the recommendations of the Seminar on Women in Fisheries in Indo-China Countries in March 1996 in Phnom Penh. The participants regrouped the recommendations in order to transform them into initial actions and activities.

Recommendations 8 to 11 deal with research while recommendations 2 to 4 address development issues.

Research
Recommendation 8 suggests the forming of a network of researchers to disseminate information, exchange research results, and formulate joint projects.

Recommendation 9 considers how research and development agencies should assist government agencies, NGOs, and development assistance agencies to develop guidelines for projects targeting women in fisheries.

Recommendation 10 favours special in-service courses in social science research methods.

Recommendation 11 encourages more national and regional comparative studies on women in fisheries.

Development
Recommendation 2 recommends training for women in fish processing and marketing, as well as aquaculture.

Recommendation 3 suggests that extension officers should address the special needs of women.

Recommendation 4 urges departments of fisheries and universities to conduct specific programs and courses, as well as recruit women staff and promote their careers.

One of the priorities identified at the Can Tho meeting was to establish national networks in each of the riparian countries, with the participation of government agencies and NGOs.

The meeting also focused on activities to be presented at the Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries during the Asian Fisheries Society Forum in Chiang Mai, 13 November 1998. To do so, the three following working groups were established:

i. Research on Women in Fisheries
ii. Training and Extension on Women in Fisheries
iii. Women in Fisheries Networks (national and regional)

Additional research on specific topics related to women in fisheries is needed, as there is a lack of information and data on women in fisheries. This research is a precondition to developing meaningful training approaches and extension tools aimed at improving conditions of women in fisheries, including their working and living conditions in general.
The participants felt that women were particularly suited for fisheries management, stock assessment, fishery statistics, aquaculture, fish handling, fish processing and marketing. The Working Group on Research indicated the following objectives of research to develop elements of decision-making for:

i. Environmental protection and resources management;

ii. Improving health conditions and alleviating the heavy workload of women in fisheries (Note: we are reminded of the excellent poster produced in Bangladesh showing a woman with many arms and the caption, "My wife does not work!");

iii. Improving the standard of living of fisheries households;

iv. Strengthening the representation of interests and establishing platforms for capacity-building;

v. Developing the application of adequate tools for communication, training and capacity-building;

vi. Shaping development activities according to given leadership and cultural patterns;

vii. The establishment of information channels; and

viii. Prioritizing target groups.

In order to streamline research on women in fisheries and make approaches comparable, participants at the round table should exchange experience and information on future research interests. The grid table developed for this purpose might also be helpful to identify research experience on women in fisheries in each of the riparian countries.

Specific topics
The Working Group on Research identified nine topics for further research:

i. Gender-specific use of natural resources;

ii. Working conditions (level of technology, organization of work);

iii. Living conditions (sanitary and hygiene, health, number and spacing of children);

iv. Women's organization (at different levels in a society);

v. Educational level of women;

vi. Time allocation (housekeeping, fishing, and/or fisheries activities, leisure time for herself);

vii. Gender-specific decision-making processes (in household/community);

viii. Access to information; and

ix. Vulnerable groups (widowed, disabled, aged).

The full list is a tall order to address and requires a mechanism to be able to actively address these issues.

Establishing national networks in the Lower Mekong Basin
The implementation of networks, which focus on communication, and the exchange of ideas, experiences, and approaches, will contribute to addressing some of the constraints in women
in fisheries. Each country should assess its genuine needs and identify ways for establishing a national network on women in fisheries.

With the assistance of the Interim Regional Coordinator (Dr Kathleen Maties), the riparian countries have held various meetings to establish their respective national networks for women in fisheries. The setup of each national network is different as it corresponds to the modalities in the respective country.

Thailand

Meeting on women in fisheries in Thailand

On 1 August 1997, the MRC Fisheries Programme convened a meeting in Bangkok to discuss a national network for women in fisheries in Thailand. This meeting was the first of a series of others held in the riparian countries. After the national networks are established, the MRC Fisheries Programme is planning a regional network meeting.

For Thailand, the national network is anticipated to improve the quality of life of women in fisheries, including their households. This is an opportunity to effectively utilize the human resources potential of women in fisheries in Thailand.

The "brain storming" meeting tried to ascertain whether there is a need for a national network for women in fisheries in Thailand. The meeting concluded that it is important to have a network for training and information exchange. The network could also formulate and implement projects to help the women in fisheries improve their quality of life.

Objectives and scope of the national network for women in fisheries in Thailand

To compare with the three other national networks in the Lower Mekong Basin, the Thai network should start with freshwater fisheries. A way of raising awareness of the role of women in fisheries should be found. At present, there does not seem to be enough information available on this topic. One output of the network could be a bibliography on women in fisheries. It is important to have a Mekong element within the national network for Thailand to exchange information on a regional level. A research group was created for this purpose.

The meeting agreed to the following objectives of the national network in Thailand:

i. Increase awareness of women's role in fisheries;
ii. Information exchange;
iii. Support for research: how the network can study issues that need to be addressed; and
iv. Enhance gender sensitivity at the government level.
The scope of activities could include:

i. Collect information on research done to date;

ii. Respond to requests for information;

iii. Offer advice and training opportunities on gender research methodology; and

iv. Prepare and maintain a contact list of network members and those interested in its activities.

Various constraints are apparent in identifying core funding for the network. For example, most of the Thai participants were not able to attend prior meetings on women in fisheries and did not have enough information at their disposal nor the decision-making authority to represent their respective organizations. All participants were already committed to many other activities and could not undertake new tasks at that time.

The MRC Fisheries Programme can assist with the preparation of a project proposal and the identification of potential donors to support it. The need for reliable gender specific information and statistics should be emphasized, as well as assistance to standardize research methodology.

Thai task force
Although it was not possible to establish the national network for women in fisheries in Thailand nor to select a national coordinator at the August meeting, a task force was formed consisting of representatives from: (a) Chulalongkorn University; (b) Asian Institute of Technology (AIT); (c) K rirk University; (d) the SEA FDEC Training Department; and (e) the MRC Fisheries Programme.

Research topics
The participants completed a table that was developed at the Can Tho meeting. Some of the major issues that emerged included:

i. Lack of socioeconomic data by gender

To plan for women's participation in community-based fisheries management, it would be useful to collect socioeconomic information by gender. This would include statistics establishing the number of women engaged in capture fisheries and aquaculture, employed as labour in the fishing sector, and as fish processors and in fish marketing.

ii. Lack of information and statistics on women in fisheries in the Mekong Basin

It would also be useful to have information on those women in fisheries who are responsible for both earning income through fisheries and contributing to family and child care, including numbers (statistics) of women who are in this role, time spent in the activities, locations and fisheries involved, as well as women's status in the community.

iii. Need to achieve greater recognition for women in fisheries

One factor inhibiting women's participation is the fact that women are not recognised by their male peers in public meetings and other decision-making situations. Approaches to increase women's participation in fisheries management are required as women tend to think about the "quality of life" factors, and this is an important consideration for sustainable management of fisheries resources. This perspective of the long-term could help improve fisheries management decisions. Case studies would help to indicate useful
ways to generate more recognition of women by male fisher folk and by fisheries managers. For example, research could help determine how recognition of women's participation has been achieved or why it has not.

Suggested research topics for Thailand

i. How changes in the fisheries sector have impacted women
   Study the evolving role of women within the context of changes occurring over the last 20 years in the fisheries sector, and notably the increase in the commercial industry and how this has affected women.

ii. Alternative livelihoods for Thai women during the spawning season: ways to assist women in fisheries during the migration and spawning period
   During the spawning period when the fishery is closed, women do not have a supply of fish. Many find it difficult to find anything to sell. Male members of the household tend to migrate to urban centres, leaving their women with small children at home. Programs to find alternative means of generating income during this period need to be formulated.

iii. Review of the fishery laws of Thailand and how they impact women
   This would be a policy-level research project.

iv. Women's role and constraints in aquaculture
   This could be a joint activity with the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia (NACA).

v. Women's access to and management of fisheries resources
   In terms of fisheries management, fisherwomen should be trained on how to conserve the fisheries resources. Women should be targeted for this type of training, as they may be able to influence their husbands in the direction of adopting sustainable fishing practices.

vi. Women's role in community fish pond management in northeast Thailand.

vii. Distribution of benefits between men and women: are these balanced?

viii. Case studies on empowerment of women in fisheries: are there successful examples?

Summary of the Thai discussion
The results of the Thai discussion can serve as examples for others.

i. There is a need for the national network and the will to organize it.

ii. A working group consisting of a larger group than the meeting participants is required to discuss implications of the network in detail.

iii. A research network was established from 1 August, starting with work in the Lower Mekong Basin (i.e., north and northeast Thailand). After this initial step, the scope may be extended to include the entire country.

iv. The Social Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University was selected to be the focal point and to begin the work. A research network was established initially.
v. The MRC Fisheries Programme has only a limited amount of money at its disposal for networking activities. However, it has expertise in approaching donors and assisting in identifying funds to support interim tasks.

vi. A Task Force or "Steering Committee" is preparing a draft project proposal and considering steps to establish an interim network.

Follow-up actions for Thailand
The Task Force or "Steering Committee" for the National Network for Women in Fisheries in Thailand held its first meeting at the Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, on 28 August. An outline of a project proposal was prepared to seek funding support to continue work on the network. The MRC Fisheries Programme offered advice regarding the preparation of the draft proposal, including budget items and potential donors.

A Research Network on Women in Fisheries was established. Mrs. Napat Gordon was chosen as the Research Network Coordinator. The ultimate goal in future is to establish a national network for the entire geographical area of Thailand, but that may occur at a later stage.

The SEAFDEC Training Department has collected information for the list of potential members of the network and the inventory of assistance provided to women in fisheries in Thailand.

Cambodia

Establishment of the Cambodian network
With the assistance of the MRC Freshwater Capture Fisheries Management Project in Cambodia, a meeting about the establishment of the network in Cambodia convened at the Department of Fisheries on 7 October 1997. The meeting was a "brain storming session" where the participants discussed:

i. The results of the Can Tho round table discussion and assessed their relevance to the Cambodian reality;

ii. If there is a need for a national network, who should be the main players? And

iii. Identification of the interested institutions and sectors in women in fisheries in Cambodia.

It was apparent that there is strong participation by women in fisheries in Cambodia. There is also a need to strengthen the exchange of information on women in fisheries topics, a precondition for designing sound sectoral policies. The establishment of a network, which functions as a platform of sharing and creating ideas and experiences, identifying constraints and developing solutions for improved working and living conditions of the indigent women in the fishery sector is considered to be necessary for a country like Cambodia.

The main objective of the 7 October meeting was to begin a thinking and discussion process about the needs and possibilities for setting up a national network on women in fisheries in Cambodia among institutions and projects involved in the fisheries sector. A later meeting (held in the Khmer language) identified the necessary procedures or first steps to be taken.
Moreover, the selection of research topics for discussion at the Symposium on Women in Fisheries in Asia (Chiang Mai, 13 November 1998) was another objective accomplished. The topics emerged due to an inventory of existing research experiences on women in fisheries in Cambodia. Although there are a number of articles and descriptions of women's participation in the fishery sector in Cambodia, the main question, "What are the women's real problems in fisheries, and how can these problems be addressed from a sectarian point of view?" has not been fully investigated or answered. Moreover, the existing literature on women in fisheries in Cambodia does not always differentiate between issues related to the fishery sector and other sectors such as health and education, as well as the more general cultural, sociological, and political system in the country.

Working Group on Cambodian National Network on Women in Fisheries

As networking has to do with work in the form of coordinating activities and gathering and sharing (of information) as established in the main objective, the meeting decided to select a working group, which will start with basic information gathering activities.

The female participants selected the following representatives to form the Working Group on Women in Fisheries in Cambodia: Ms. Keo Sovannary (Department of Fisheries, as leader) and three others from the Department of Fisheries and the Asian Institute of Technology.

It is assumed that while the working group is gathering information and promoting communication between interested institutions and organizations involved in women in fisheries, the national network of Cambodia itself will become focused on identified needs. The working group discussed the needs and objectives of a national network on women in fisheries in Cambodia and focused on the following topics:

i. Need for clear identification of the problems of women in the fishery sector in Cambodia;

ii. Sharing the experience of the problem identification process;

iii. Gathering and exchanging information on women in fisheries through the establishment of an inventory of women in fisheries specific knowledge, experience, methodologies and research, etc.; and

iv. Sharing information within a network should contribute to policy analysis on women in fisheries in Cambodia and lead to future research topics and approaches.

The following immediate objective for the establishment of a national network on women in fisheries in Cambodia was formulated:

Information gathered and shared on women in fisheries in order to lead to research and policy formulation approaches.

To achieve this immediate objective, some baseline activities were identified. These aim at institutional strengthening as well as at clarifying the overall spectrum of existing institutions, organizations, projects, people involved and research activities realized and ongoing in women in fisheries in Cambodia. The work program considered two activities:
i. Elaborate an inventory on women in fisheries in Cambodia; and

ii. Develop guidelines for a network on women in fisheries in Cambodia.

These main activities were broken down into smaller, more concrete activity steps and the working group was encouraged to modify and improve the work program according to the needs which might appear along the way and while implementing the planned activities. The work program is only the first step, and requires periodic preplanning in order to keep in touch with reality.

The working group, led by Ms. Keo Sovannary, has drawn up a schedule and indicators for their operational planning according to their usual work obligations.

Vietnam

National network in Vietnam

Since September 1997, the Ministry of Fisheries Steering Committee for Women in Fisheries has conducted a series of planning meetings. Unlike the other countries in the Mekong Basin, Vietnam has already institutionalized a specific committee to address women in fisheries issues. A proposal to obtain funds to conduct a larger three-day meeting including women from all parts of Vietnam was approved by the Embassy of Denmark in Hanoi. The proposed meeting is considered as the "Founding Meeting of the Women in Fisheries Network in Vietnam." Participants from the Can Tho round table discussion, as well as NGOs active in the field, along with members of the academic community and the private sector will attend the meeting. The Ministry of Fisheries Steering Committee for Women in Fisheries will convene this meeting.

To organize the national network, attention will be given to defining points of unity and forging joint plans. The general aim of the undertaking is to help promote the rights of women in fisheries through network building, and organizing various groups involved in this area. The nature of the proposed network is a multidisciplinary, tripartite group bringing together the government, private, and academic sectors.

At the Can Tho meeting, the Ministry of Fisheries volunteered to facilitate the setting up of a national network in collaboration with Can Tho University, the University of Agriculture and Fisheries in Ho Chi Minh City, the MRC Reservoir Fisheries Project in Dak Lak and others.

In Vietnam there are many different groups working in the field of fisheries, each with their own efforts at addressing the concerns of women in fisheries. However, these efforts may not have sufficient impact because they are not coordinated. The field of women in fisheries is also relatively new in Vietnam, and a sharing of the experiences and lessons is needed. Networking among the different groups on women in fisheries has become crucial to better ensure the impact of the development efforts.

The direct target group of the meeting in Vietnam includes government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the academic community. The indirect target group comprises
the women and fishers in the communities where the organizations are working. Government agencies involved are: the Ministry of Fisheries, Research Institute for Aquaculture 3 (RIA-3), Vietnam Women's Union and the MRC Management of Reservoir Fisheries in Dak Lak Province. Academic participants will come from Can Tho University, the College of Agriculture and Forestry in Ho Chi Minh City, the Institute of Tropical Biology and others. The private sector and NGOs will also be represented. This proposed meeting would be a further step toward developing a regional network.

The main goals of establishing the national network in Vietnam are to improve the welfare of women in fisheries and to improve the information exchange on all levels. Its specific objectives are to:

i. Define the content and form of the national network in Vietnam;

ii. Formulate a general plan of action, with concrete tasks leading to active participation in the regional network on women in fisheries;

iii. Organize communities and spell out functions in the implementation of the plan of action; and

iv. Consider and define the relationship of the national network with the national strategy for women in development in Vietnam.

Expected results

i. Formalization of the National Network on Women in Fisheries in Vietnam (clarification of membership and functions, and coordination mechanisms);

ii. General plan of action (for the next three months); and

iii. Documentation of the proceedings and dissemination of the results.

Lao PDR

National Network for the Lao PDR

The Department of Fisheries and the Lao Women's Union in Vientiane will plan a national network for the Lao PDR. As in Vietnam, a proposal needs to be prepared to secure funding for the preliminary meeting.

Funding the national networks and the regional network

Running a network efficiently requires appropriate funding. At the present stage where national and regional networks on women in fisheries are being initiated, no specific funds are available yet. The MRC Fisheries Programme is actually providing some economic assistance to the interim coordination, without a specific budget line designated for this purpose (See Annex 6 of Summary Report on the Thai National Network for Women in Fisheries, August 1997). The MRC Fisheries Programme can provide advice on preparing project proposals, as well as advise on how to approach possible donors who may have specific budget lines for networks and/or women (in fisheries) or gender related interests.
Role of women in water resources development

Several members of the respective national networks for women in fisheries participated in the Basin-wide Seminar on the Study of the Role of Women in Water Resources Development in the Lower Mekong Basin held in December 1997 in Nong Khai, Thailand. This seminar, organized by the MRC Secretariat, offered yet another opportunity for networking and exchanging information among the four riparian countries and the Interim Regional Coordinator.