



**WorldFish**  
C E N T E R

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## Gender and fisheries: Do women support, complement or subsidize men's small-scale fishing activities?

### KEY MESSAGES

- Women's involvement in fisheries is more significant than often assumed. According to current estimates from nine major fish producing countries, they comprise 46% of the labor force in small-scale capture fisheries-related activities, including pre- and post-harvesting work. Their current engagement is shaped by rapidly dwindling fisheries stocks on one hand, and the increased global demand for fish on the other.
- Formal statistics rarely reveal the extent and nature of the essential contribution of women to men's pursuit of fisheries as a livelihood in many developing countries. Without women's hidden, under-enumerated and under-valued work, men might not be fishing at all. However, while men often take pride in their identity as fishers, it is not clear which identities are important to women.
- We are only beginning to understand the myriad ways in which women support, complement or subsidize men's fishing efforts. However, while these activities contribute to increasing the overall well-being of fishing households, they bring very little returns to the women themselves. Moreover, women are rarely involved in decision-making related to fishing at the household, community, regional or national levels.
- In many countries, members of fishing households are less educated and have less access to health and infrastructure services than those of neighboring communities, such as farmers. Generally, women's access to and outcomes in education and health are less than that of men in fishing communities.
- There is a need for evidence-based policy in the fisheries sector to ensure gender equitable outcomes in the pursuit of livelihood strategies leading to the well-being of households engaged in small-scale fisheries. This need becomes more urgent in dealing with gendered impacts of and responses to climate change because current gender disparities will be exacerbated by economic and social costs to fisheries anticipated from such changes
- At the WorldFish Center, research on gender and fisheries currently focuses on:
  1. Markets, trade and migration
  2. Capabilities and well-being
  3. Identities and networks
  4. Governance and rights
  5. Climate change, disasters and resilience

## WHY GENDER MATTERS IN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES

The fisheries sector has long been considered a male domain, signifying a sense of adventure and risk valued by men but from which women are often excluded. However, women's engagement in small-scale capture fisheries-related activities, including pre- and post-harvesting work, is estimated at 46% in nine major fish producing countries (FAO, WorldFish, World Bank 2008). These figures may be the tip of an iceberg. If gleaning and aquaculture were included, women's involvement could be higher. However, this kind of formal enumeration rarely reveals the informal ways in which women are essential to pursuing livelihoods in communities engaged in small-scale fishing.

In many parts of the world, women engage in collecting mollusks and near-shore fishing using small hand nets. In some regions of developing countries, such as East and West Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, women also use gear to fish near-shore and off-shore in canoes or boats (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988, FAO, World Bank, IFAD 2009). More commonly, women support men's fishing activities by engaging in pre- and post-harvest subsistence tasks and managing the household while men are away at sea. They might also support men by providing much needed credit for boats and gear (Walker 2001). They complement men's fishing activities in household livelihood portfolios by undertaking fisheries-related tasks that are remunerated with wages or profit such as processing or trading or by engaging in other paid activities. In some cases, women might even engage in activities that bring more returns than fishing, such as overseas migrant labor, the remittances from which effectively subsidize men's fishing effort. Most often women's fisheries-related activities which contribute to the overall wellbeing of households bring lower returns



to women relative to that of men (Weeratunge and Snyder 2009).

Gender disparities in fisheries can result in lower labor productivity within the sector and inefficient allocation of labor at household and national levels. Customary beliefs, norms and laws and unfavorable regulatory structures of the state, reduce women's access to fisheries resources, assets and decision-making (FAO, 2006; Porter, 2006; Okali and Holvoet, 2007), confining them to the lower end of supply chains within the so-called "informal" sector in many developing countries. As much as in agriculture, forestry and industry, women are likely to constitute a larger proportion of the poor within the fisheries sector and are often excluded as a resource user group in fisheries governance and resource management. The differential impact of and contribution to ecological degradation and depletion of aquatic resources by women and men are often overlooked. These income, asset and power disparities between women and men are likely to be exacerbated by climate change (Brody et al., 2008).

While women bear the brunt of the costs of gender inequities, these costs are distributed widely and are a cause of persistent poverty for all members of the society. Addressing gender inequities by improving women's





incomes and educational levels, as well as their access to information and decision making processes, improves human capabilities of the household, as well as society in general. Important for sustainable change are measures to improve governance, especially enhanced voice and accountability, and public sector capacity to be responsive to gender-specific needs.

There is increasing evidence that those countries which have performed well towards achieving gender equity have also reached higher levels of economic growth and social well-being in general (World Economic Forum, 2008). Comparing the cross-country results of the gender gap and global hunger indices reveals that investments in reducing gender inequality in literacy, education, health and survival will effectively reduce hunger (IFPRI 2009).

## THEME 1: MARKETS, TRADE AND MIGRATION

Women and men are differentially placed in fish supply chains. While women participate in small-scale fishing in several regions of the world, and more often in gleaning for mollusks, their main engagement is in processing and trading. Development projects, fisheries management and policy formation have often overlooked or neglected post-harvest and trading activities of women. The connection between fishing and trading is critical but many interventions focus entirely on fishing activities, such as regulating catch, gear and access rights, rather than on improving processing and access to markets.

The impact of industrialized fishing is beginning to be understood and indeed has been found to push artisanal male fishers out of business and to undermine the livelihoods of female traders (Neis et al. 2005). Yet, new industries can also bring new opportunities such as women taking up seaweed cultivation or harvesting sea cucumber, or finding employment in fish processing factories, where working conditions are often poor (SDF and FSF 2009).



Both fishers and traders migrate seasonally between regions and even across national boundaries to find better catches and markets. The number of women migrating in search of economic opportunities attached to fishing, as well as other livelihoods, appears to be rising in many parts of the world. An aspect of migration and markets, and the remote locations of fishing communities and camps, is that there are relatively high HIV prevalence rates in many fishing communities. Women processors and traders in parts of Africa are particularly vulnerable, as they may resort to transactional sex to obtain fish.

While some research has been done on markets and migration, we still know little about fish value chains and how they might be improved for those who depend upon them. Nor do we know enough about how consumption patterns and changes in seafood and labor markets in Africa, Asia and the Pacific affect livelihoods and how these changes may be gendered in their effects. How does market engagement affect poverty and what are the different constraints of women and men to more effective participation in markets? These gaps in knowledge affect our ability to inform sectoral policies which emphasize poverty reduction.



## What WorldFish is doing: The fish-for-sex issue

Women processors and traders in Malawi, Mozambique, DR Congo, Uganda and Zambia travel to remote fishing camps to purchase fish. Some of them are known to engage in transactional sex to obtain fish. Two explanations are discussed in Bene's and Merten's (2008) analysis of this phenomenon. One is that women traders/processors are poor and are compelled or coerced to offer sex in exchange for fish. The second is that they choose to engage in sex to reduce the transactional costs of trade. Are women victims or agents of their livelihood strategies? The answer is complex.

Women's livelihoods are enmeshed in issues of markets, migration, capabilities, well-being, networks and rights. The gender division of labor in fisheries in several of these societies is that men fish, while women process, and both women and men trade. It is not clear whether exchanging sex for fish is a new coping strategy brought about by scarcity of fish and/or increased demand for fish in global markets, or is a long standing transactional arrangement in societies where sexual norms are relatively more fluid. Transactional sex is a livelihood strategy that both men and women can use to build and maintain personalized exchange networks and is found in a wide variety of contexts, in a number of African societies (Moore et al., 2007).

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS makes both women engaged in trading and processing, as well as men engaged in fishing, vulnerable to disease, reducing their well-being. If afflicted with the disease, women especially face social stigma, marginalization and poverty, due to loss of employment and costs of health care. In addition, women are burdened by reproductive responsibilities, related to household and child care, that men do not necessarily face.

WorldFish together with FAO is currently implementing the "Fisheries and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Investing in sustainable solutions" project, supported by SIDA and NORAD. The project has developed a "Fish trader +" pilot model, based on the economic rationale of women's engagement in the fish trade to secure their livelihoods through business-based innovations. This includes a fund for providing women traders loans to stabilize businesses, promotion of trader associations, identifying opportunities for providing additional services (such as health-related products and home-based care) in migrant camps and awareness-raising on HIV/AIDS within fishing communities at large. This type of model provides the opportunity to test the extent to which economic interventions need to incorporate culturally-sensitive social interventions to achieve gender equitable outcomes in fish trading.

## THEME 2: CAPABILITIES AND WELL-BEING

A well-being approach to small-scale fishing encompasses economic aspects of livelihood together with a focus on capabilities such as education, health and food security that shape livelihood options and people's aspirations for the future. Women and men pursue different livelihood strategies with varying levels of capacities and assets during their life courses, resulting in different well-being outcomes (Hapke and Ayyankeri 2004). Fishing communities are often marginalized, mobile, and found in remote locations which can constrain their access to education and health facilities. Women and girls within these communities can suffer the worst levels of education



and health. In many African fishing communities, illiteracy is prevalent among both men and women.

Well-being is closely linked to vulnerability. Shocks which can increase vulnerability and reduce well-being include price changes in fish and input markets, sudden illness



and deaths, births and marriages, war and conflict, natural disasters and climate change, all of which may demand considerable resources. We lack sufficient information on how these kinds of events can affect livelihoods and wellbeing of men and women differently in fishing communities.

While we have some understanding of coping strategies and responses to shocks in fishing communities, we still know little about how men and women assess well-being and how their perceptions affect their livelihood strategies and quality of life. We also need more analysis of the gendered nature of access to resources in fishing and ecosystem services and the overall effect this has on livelihoods and well-being.

### THEME 3: IDENTITIES AND NETWORKS

Social networks can be critical for both individuals' and households' survival. Networks can also exact costs as they may require individuals to meet various obligations. Membership in formal organizations such as fisheries associations or cooperatives is more prevalent among men than women but poor men may also be excluded. In Ghana, access to and membership in networks can in many ways determine success (Overa 1993). It can lead to social and economic differentiation both among fishers and fish traders.

In promoting gender equity in the fisheries sector, it should not be assumed that all women want to become fishers. Men are often perceived to take pride in their identity as fishers. There is often an assumption that this identity is



preferable to fish trader or processor but in some areas fish traders actually have more prestige and greater economic status. We know very little about identity construction processes among women in fishing communities.

Identity is linked to a sense of belonging in networks, and shaped by social structures and processes and cultural norms. Identities shaped by social networks have gendered consequences in fishing communities and can affect the ability of individuals to cope with or rise out of poverty. Do formal networks improve livelihoods and bargaining power of women and the poor or do they exclude certain members of communities? We need a better understanding of how networks can be used and improved to bring about gender-equitable returns from fisheries.

### THEME 4: GOVERNANCE AND RIGHTS

Governance regimes affect access, control over and management of resources in fishing and aquaculture communities around the world. Co-management and community-based fisheries management have emerged as important efforts to shift from a top-down, command and control approach to one in which decisions about resource use and benefits from those resources are devolved to the people who depend on them for their livelihoods. Still, co-management can exclude some groups of people and privilege others.

New governance systems can come up against traditional and local structures, local patronage systems that regulate access to water and land, as well as national institutions, which may be gender-biased. In some cases, these other institutions have weakened community-based initiatives



and caused them to fail. In other instances, development projects which have aimed at improving management have actually undermined or reduced the roles and decision-making powers that women previously had.

Governance also affects fish trading as small-scale fish traders are vulnerable to both official and unofficial rules and regulations. In Cambodia and Thailand for example, payment of arbitrary fees to customs officers by women fish traders engaged in cross-border trade leads to unpredictable costs that reduce their economic returns

(Kusakabe et al. 2006) . We also need to understand the gendered impacts of new trade regimes such as food safety standards and certification on small-scale producers.

Research on governance and rights needs a better grasp of how men and women participate in governance structures at the local, regional and national level. While community-based and co-management approaches have attempted to devolve more authority to resource users, cultural and practical constraints might hamper women's participation and decision-making within these new structures.

### What WorldFish is doing: Does community-based fisheries management (CBFM) reduce gender disparities?

Women participate in community-based fisheries committees in Cambodia for three major reasons: improvements in livelihoods, enhancement of capabilities (skills, knowledge and self-confidence) and a belief in sustainability in fisheries resources for the next generation. While women are active in the savings and credit, and self-help groups, only a minority assume leadership positions in the committees. The active engagement in savings and credit groups are based on traditional gender norms that associate women with household financial management, as well as patience and negotiation skills to collect dues from group members. Rarely do women engage in patrolling illegal fishing, as this takes place at night and social norms discourage female mobility after dark.

WorldFish supported the Fisheries Administration of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of Cambodia and the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Learning Institute (CBNRM Learning Institute) to study the "Gender implications in community based natural resource management: The roles, needs and aspirations of women in community fisheries" at six selected sites. This provided a number of valuable insights into the gender dimensions of governance, rights, capabilities and well-being.

Women identified capacity-building for livelihood activities, improving capabilities, reducing illiteracy, improved health care, as well as support from men in sharing household tasks as priority needs. Similarly, gender equity, better living standards, education for children and sustainable resource management emerged as future aspirations in fisheries-related livelihoods in all six communities.

The difficulty in balancing productive (income generation) with reproductive<sup>1</sup> (housework) tasks, based on gender restrictive social norms was identified as a persistent constraint for women to participate in community-based management. Illiteracy or limited education and lack of confidence were other important constraints. These findings are consistent with that of Resurreccion (2008b) who argues that gender mainstreaming in community fisheries in Tonle Sap in Cambodia is a myth. She points out that non-fisher stakeholders who are dependent on the same resource base are often excluded and women leaders are often the wives of male leaders, conforming to existing stratification within villages. More importantly she emphasizes that gender norms assigning social reproduction obligations disproportionately to women restrict their overall participation — a socio-cultural fact that is consistently overlooked in conceptualizing and planning for women's participation in community-based governance structures.

<sup>1</sup> "Reproductive work" is a social science term used in this brief to classify all work undertaken to reproduce the labor power of the household. This includes child care, food preparation, care of the sick and collecting of natural resources such as water, firewood, fodder, medicinal plants and fruit and related tasks, which enable the household to undertake economic activities.

## THEME 5: CLIMATE CHANGE, DISASTERS AND RESILIENCE

Climate change has emerged as one of the biggest challenges to the resilience of human societies. Coastal and flood plain communities by virtue of their location are vulnerable to exposure and face high risks in climate change-related disasters. Costs to women and children are often disproportionate because customary norms and beliefs prevent them from acquiring skills and capacities, such as the ability to swim, or access to information on impending disaster. Households are used to dealing with idiosyncratic shocks (gear and harvest losses, illness, death) but climate-induced disasters put stress on informal means of coping, such as social networks. Such disasters also put strain on assets used for consumption or for investing in livelihood activities and micro/small enterprises.



Market (micro-insurance) and social safety net (transfers) mechanisms are generally considered effective strategies for managing disaster risks. However, the openness to and effectiveness of such options differs. Risk perception, vulnerability, coping strategies and adaptation needs also differ among different categories of women and men. Are markets or safety nets more likely to provide gender-equitable outcomes? Vulnerable fishing communities now excluded from social protection need appropriate climate change adaptation options.

Assessing the gendered impacts of climate change and disasters, and responses among differentiated categories of women and men is therefore necessary. A better

understanding of the gendered nature of coping and risk perception would help us in the design of gender equitable mitigation and adaptation strategies to address the potentially unequal impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups.

We also need to ensure that policies and institutional arrangements, such as disaster preparedness plans and post-disaster rehabilitation processes, which help mainstream climate change adaptation into broader fisheries and rural development policies, incorporate gender concerns. Women need to be included in decision-making related to mitigation and adaptation options that build resilience in fishing communities.

## CONCLUSION

The research, policy advice and pilot interventions linked with mainstreaming gender analysis at WorldFish are an evolving agenda. It is based on gaps in research and the needs of stakeholders in the fisheries sector. Thus, we continuously seek your feedback to ensure that this agenda remains current and relevant.

By using the gender lens to analyze issues of sustainability of small-scale fisheries, we would like to establish the differential contribution of women and men to production and value addition within this sector, as well as economic and social returns from these activities. As fishing resources dwindle, are women supporting, complementing or subsidizing men's fishing activities? The well-being of fishing communities, and resilience of fishing as a way of life and a way of making a living, are dependent on the answers we manage to find.





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