

As World Fish Stocks Decline, Researchers Turn to an Untapped Resource – Women

Equity Issues Top Agenda as Scientists Question Fishing Industry Practices

From backyard ponds in Bangladesh to the deep-water fisheries off Africa's Atlantic coast, women's role as "fisher folk" is fast changing one of the most tradition-bound segments of the world's food supply chain. Changes in fishing practices and in the relatively new field of aquaculture, researchers say, bring with them new challenges and opportunities, but few signposts to provide guidance.

"The international community is paying more and more attention to women and their role in maintaining the health of the world's fisheries," says Meryl Williams, Director General of ICLARM - The World Fish Center, a Future Harvest Center based in Penang, Malaysia. "But our knowledge is sketchy, and our ability to reach out is limited. "Until quite recently," she adds, "the macho image of the fisherman colored much of our thinking, but that image is changing fast." Williams estimates that at least 50 million developing country women are employed in the fishing industry, usually in low paying but important jobs such as net making, processing, and marketing. Already mired in poverty, their circumstances are sure to deteriorate as they come face to face with the challenges of globalization, declining fish supplies, and competition from modern fishing fleets, she says.

Williams notes that most women involved in fishing lack access to tools and credit, a voice in decision-

making, or the opportunity to receive training. "To succeed in a world where privatization is on the rise and subsidies for fishing are disappearing, women will need a lot of extra help," she says. "Until now, however, the very groups that you would expect to provide support have literally missed the boat."

Low Pay, Little Security, High Rates of AIDS

Stella Williams, an economist from Nigeria's Obafemi Awolowo University notes that gender programs rarely reach out to women working in fisheries and that fisheries programs have been slow to take steps to improve their lot. "In developing countries," she says, "the work of women fishers is mainly found in the informal economy, where they continue to receive low pay and little in the way of job security. Most women lag far behind men in terms of earnings and in the services that would improve profitability."

"When fishing activities are expanded or mechanized, they are frequently taken over by men," adds Lyn Lambeth, a fisheries officer of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in New Caledonia. "When women find work in the production sector, for example in tuna processing plants in the Pacific, it's usually in low-paid production line work," she says.

Ironically, one of the few areas where women do not seem to lag behind their male counterparts is in their rate of HIV infection and AIDS. Epidemiological studies show

that fishermen are among the groups most prone to be HIV positive and that they are passing on the virus to their partners. The phenomenon is believed to be associated with long absences, visits to commercial sex workers, and drug use. In Tanzania, workers in the fishing industry are five times as likely to die from AIDS as are farm workers.

The Good News

Although women working in the fishing industry lag far behind their male counterparts in almost all categories, there is some good news says Ida Siason, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Philippines. Asian women, she says, have made headway as fish farmers. Moreover, expert networks have been established to assist women in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and in the Philippines.

New technology also helps. In Bangladesh, the only country in the world where men have a greater life expectancy than women, the introduction of farming in backyard ponds is helping thousands of women take greater control of their lives. Fish farming is helping women not only feed their families, but also provides much needed income, and even aesthetic pleasure from growing attractive fish such as Silver Barb and Tilapia.

But progress has been uneven. Community-based management of the country's small, seasonal, inland bodies of water indicates that attempts to empower women through women-only management schemes have largely collapsed

because women managers were not respected. Committees involving both men and women have apparently been more successful.

“Working together will be key to overcoming many types of problems,” says Williams of the World Fish Center. “New research in the fisheries sector is needed to develop appropriate actions, programs, and policies that address gender. A focus on women alone will not be sufficient.”

She cautions, however, that women’s roles in fishing—as in society as a whole—are changing. As these roles change, it is important to ensure that women not only become more equal partners with men, but that they also expand their work beyond the subsistence level. “To achieve that objective,” she adds, “it is essential that more women be brought into decision-making to assure the survival and improved well-being of the world’s

fishing industry.”

“The world’s fish stocks are in decline,” says Meryl Williams, “and science can provide the technology to help deal with this problem. But even with the best technology, it’s going to be increasingly difficult to resolve these problems unless women are given a fair opportunity to compete.”

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Michael New Awarded Honorary Life Member of the World Aquaculture Society



*Michael New, OBE
Honorary Life Member of the World
Aquaculture Society*

On 24 April 2002, during the opening ceremonies of the annual meeting of the World Aquaculture Society (WAS), which was held in Beijing, People’s Republic of China, Michael New was awarded an Honorary Life Membership of the Society.

The award was presented in recognition of Michael New’s services to international aquaculture development. Honorary life membership of WAS has been

granted to only 34 individuals since the inception of the Society in 1970; of these recipients five have been European.

Michael New was President of WAS in 1997-1998 and commences a two-year Presidency of the European Aquaculture Society in October 2002. In 1999 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his services to aquaculture in developing countries.

Winner of the Naga Award 2001



Announcing the winner of the Naga Award 2001: **K. Kathiresan** with the winning entry, **Biology of Mangroves and Mangroves Ecosystems**, which he co-authored with B.L. Bingham.

Congratulations!

We wish to thank all the nominators and nominees who participated in the 2001 Naga Award Competition.

Kathiresan K., Bingham B.L. 2001 Biology of mangroves and mangrove ecosystems. *Advances in Marine Biology* 40: 84-254.

The *Biology of Mangroves and Mangroves Ecosystem*, published in 2001, is an excellent synthesis of our current knowledge on mangroves. It comprehensively encompasses mangroves distribution, evolutionary aspects, biology of the mangal, mangrove-associated flora and fauna, responses of mangroves to stress, and the ecological role of these systems. It contains a large amount of grey literature, particularly from Asian countries, and will be a key resource for marine scientists, ecologists and all persons or organizations interested in the biology and conservation of mangroves. This publication is likely to become a reference for many years.

