

APPENDIX 2: PRESS RELEASE

Where are the Women in Fisheries?

"Global attention is finally being turned on to the substantial contributions that women make to world fisheries", said Meryl Williams, Director General of the World Fish Center at a recent symposium. "But we now discover that we have only sketchy knowledge of these contributions in most countries. The macho image of the sector has kept it out of the view of most general women's development programs and has also acted against an internal examination by the sector. The tide is now turning on this neglect of the gender dimensions of the fisheries sector."

In the supermarkets and restaurants of north America and Europe, fish and shellfish have become fashionable, especially for the health conscious. Few consumers stop to reflect that fish and other living aquatic resources are the world's largest remaining food harvest from the wild nor do they stop to think where the seafood they eat comes from. These days, more and more fish comes from aquaculture - the fastest growing food production sector. For most people in the Asia-Pacific and much of African and Latin America, fish is not for fashion but is tradition and life. The greater part of the world's fish supply comes from these countries where much of it is harvested or grown by millions of small and very small scale producers. More than 120 million people depend on fisheries for all or part of their incomes and an estimated billion for their major source of animal protein.

Not surprisingly, women play a key role in getting fish to the table and their role is different depending on where and who they are. These roles are also changing rapidly. In many parts of Africa and Asia, women do much of the fishing in rivers, lakes and wetlands. In offshore and deep-sea fishing, women are mainly responsible for performing the skilled and time-consuming jobs that take place on-shore, such as net making and mending, processing the catch and marketing it. Women have also assumed a leading role in the rapid growth of aquaculture. In places such as the USA, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, they have become important fish entrepreneurs. Women are also actively involved in the processing of fish, whether this is done in the home on a small scale or on an export factory line. In the US and Canada, the wives and family of fishermen often take the responsibility for ensuring that all the necessary licences and regulations are followed up and they are becoming the industry advocates in fisheries management debates. All over the world, the number of women scientists and educators is on the rise in fisheries.

Despite the trendy image of fish and seafood, many fishing families in developing countries are mired in poverty and the solutions to getting people out of their poverty will have to involve the whole family, especially women and youths. Yet, most women in fisheries lack access to physical and capital resources, a voice in decision-making and access to leadership positions, training and formal education. What challenges will globalisation and its attendant features - privatisation, cutbacks or removal of subsidies to the agricultural sector and public spending on social services, demands for higher product quality, greater international interaction, often conducted in English - present for small-scale fishers and women in particular. Can they cope?

The answer is only a 'maybe' so far, according to a recent gathering of experts on the topic - a global symposium, 'Women in Fisheries: Towards a Global Overview', held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan on 29 November 2001. The Symposium was part of the Sixth Asian Fisheries Forum, 25-29 November 2001. The Symposium heard papers from all regions of the globe, examined how women were faring in fisheries and identified research and development directions.

The Symposium concluded that, while considerable progress has been made in increasing recognition of gender inequality and the gender dimensions of poverty, women's economic advancement and rights in the fisheries sector have lagged behind those of other sectors. "Unlike plants, you cannot see fishes in the water or pond except during feeding time. So, perhaps we can begin "feeding the fish" here to make women in fisheries a more visible issue," said Dr Stella Williams, an economist from Obafemi

Awolowo University in Nigeria. Gender and women's programs rarely reached out to women in fisheries and the fisheries sector programs were slow to understand and improve the lot of women in that sector.

In developing countries, the work of women fishers remain mainly within the informal economy and/or subsistence economy, where they not only continue to receive low incomes and little job and social security but lack recognition and assistance. Many are confronted with a gender wage gap and lag behind men in access to income and services that would improve the efficiency, profitability and sustainability of their activities. If a fisheries activity is enlarged or mechanized, it often becomes the domain of men. Where women do work in the production sector, for example in the tuna processing plants in the Pacific, they do low paid production line work, said Lyn Lambeth, a Fisheries Officer of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), New Caledonia.

Around the world, women along coasts and rivers traditionally catch fish with nets, traps, or by baiting or diving. In projects of the World Fish Center around the developing world, women have adopted such diverse roles as coral growers in Solomon Islands, fish farmers in Bangladesh, Malawi and Zambia, breeders of improved strains of fish in the Philippines and natural resource managers.

Speakers at the Symposium also reported on the increasingly significant role women play in the field of aquaculture. According to Dr Ida Siason, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Philippines in the Visayas, "in Southeast Asia, women have made some headway as fish farmers." In Africa, according to Stella Williams, however, "there is a predominant gender imbalance in fish farming in fishing and farming communities. In most cases men are the owners of the ponds while women and children manage these ponds."

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The changes being wrought by globalisation presents new challenges for small-scale fishers, especially women but the gender impact of globalisation on women fishers has not been systematically documented and/or evaluated and the Symposium attendees felt that the issue warrants immediate attention. In Taiwan, for example, Drs Nai Hsien Chao and Dr Chang reported on studies that showed that most women worked in husband and wife enterprises with one or two helpers. These small family firms were not attractive to the next generation and were not able to find attract the assistance to upgrade their technologies to compete in open markets.

As women are mainly subsistence producers and users of environmental resources, it would be useful to recognise and integrate women's knowledge in the conservation and management of these resources to ensure their sustainability. This rarely happened, according to Dr Parvin Sultana of the World Fish Center. Her studies on community-based management of the beels (small seasonal, inland water bodies) in Bangladesh showed that attempts to empower women through women's only management regimes failed because little respect was given to women's management. "However," said Dr Sultana, "new committees involving men and women are having more success for beel management. The focus on women has also revealed that the snails traditionally harvested by the women and previously ignored in fisheries management, are declining and these resources need to be managed against overharvesting as well as the fish."

The health and safety of men and women in fishing communities are also urgent issues addressed by the Symposium. The HIV/AIDS pandemic does not discriminate. As of the end of 2000, there were a total of 36.1 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world and in that year alone 5.3 million people were infected. Epidemiological studies on HIV/AIDS by occupation show that fishermen are among the group most prone to infection, probably due to the peculiarities of their jobs. Unsafe sex and unsafe seafaring have much in common - such as drug addiction, long periods away from home, visits to commercial sex workers and the hard work. Various studies have cited HIV prevalence levels among fishermen in Asia from 7% to as high as 15%. In Tanzania in Africa, fishers were 5 times more likely to die from AIDS as were agricultural workers.

The Symposium concluded that new knowledge must be gathered through gender-sensitive research to better understand the complexities of gender issues in the fisheries sector in order to develop appropriate actions, programmes and policies. A focus on women alone would not be sufficient. Along with the changes occurring in society, women's roles were changing in the sector and more should be done to ensure that women became more equal partners and productive participants in fisheries activities so as to improve their own and their family's nutritional and living standards. They should be given the opportunity to acquire appropriate technologies that will enable them to contribute effectively to sustained fisheries development and growth. It is therefore essential to increase women's participation and decision-making in fisheries development efforts as the survival and well-being of fishing communities depend on women's contribution in partnership with men.

In moving towards this, the symposium has proposed to set up an electronic network on gender and fisheries. In addition, formation of networks nationally and regionally was recognised as important and useful. Local resources available to set up such networks will be explored. ICLARM and AFS will publish the proceedings of the Global symposium in 2002 and disseminate the publication widely. Coinciding with the VII Asian Fisheries Forum, the Asian Fisheries Society has agreed to organize the Global Forum on Gender and Fisheries in April 2004 in Penang, Malaysia. For more information, please contact ICLARM-The World Fish Center or Asian Fisheries Society.