

NETWORKS FOR WOMEN AND GENDER IN FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEKONG REGION AND THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Women in Fisheries are an integral part of Water Resources Development. For this reason, the authors will explain the steps leading to the establishment of local and regional networks. The paper identifies a wide spectrum of problems facing Women in Fisheries in the Mekong Region and the Philippines.

Mekong Region

In order to identify solutions, some of the initiatives of the governments sharing the resources of the Mekong Region established national networks in Cambodia (October 1997), the Lao PDR (October 1999), Thailand (February 2000) and Vietnam (March 1999). The authors demonstrate how the four national networks are integral components of the regional network established in May 2000. Opportunities for conducting research activities and exchanging information on Women in Fisheries among the four countries are cited.

The Philippines

The declaration of the UN Decade for Women in 1985 stimulated activities that examined the roles and status of women in Filipino society and identified issues that needed to be addressed from the perspective of women's critical participation in national development. The same examination was undertaken in the fisheries sector, mainly through the initiation of international organizations. The Regional Workshop on the Role of Women in Fisheries Development in 1995 and the Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries in 1998 highlighted attempts at addressing the issues of women in the fisheries sector. One major recommendation that emerged from the 1998 Symposium was for the formation of networks at the national level that could pool the active participation of all sectors. The national networks that had already been established in each riparian country in the Mekong Basin served as a possible model.

Academe initiated the first meeting of potentially active network participants despite very limited resources available for this purpose. A year after this initial meeting and consciousness-raising among advocates for women in fisheries, the network was formally organized and registered.

Factors that facilitated the formulation of the network in the Philippines are described in this paper. Finally, it projects the challenges that confront the network.

Introduction

The following paper covering regional and national networks consists of two distinct parts. The first section describes the Network for Women and Gender in Fisheries Development in the Mekong Region. The example of this regional network encouraged the establishment of the National Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines. The second portion of the paper covers the establishment of the National Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines. Both these networks are vehicles for catalyzing activities that advocate for and advance the status of women in fisheries and address the problems these women encounter. It is hoped that these models may be adapted in other parts of the world to establish comparable regional and national networks to improve the quality of life of women and their households in the fisheries sector.

Network for Women and Gender in Fisheries Development in the Mekong Region

Fisheries is an important sector for food supply and a substantial part of the economic development in the countries in the Mekong Region. In the fisheries industry, women play a significant role in terms of labor, but there has been no clear policy on the promotion of women in the fisheries sector. One way to draw up policies is to increase awareness on women in fisheries and exchange information among relevant agencies within and outside the region. With this wider perception and information, the respective Department of Fisheries (and in the case of Vietnam, the Ministry of Fisheries, attesting to the importance of fisheries in the national economy) can help each respective government to introduce policies for women in fisheries. These policies can be actualized in programs that meet the needs of women in the fisheries sector, be they in remote rural areas or large-scale commercial enterprises.

Initiatives of PADEK

In recognition of some of the major obstacles facing 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, Cambodia. In October 1995, PADEK organised a Photographic Competition on Women in Asian Fisheries during the Fourth Asian Fisheries Forum (AFF) held in Beijing, China. In March 1996, a Regional Seminar on Women in Fisheries in Indo-China Countries was arranged by PADEK in Phnom Penh with participants from Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam and several development agencies and non-governmental organizations. Many pertinent recommendations were drawn up during this event.

Round Table Discussion on Women in Fisheries

Although several recommendations made at the Regional Seminar addressed the plight of women in fisheries in Southeast Asia, it was found that women at the national level could not actually put them into practice. Therefore, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Fisheries Programme and the WES (West-East-South) Aquaculture Project in Can Tho, Vietnam, jointly organised a Round Table Discussion on Women in Fisheries in the Mekong Basin in April 1997. At the Can Tho meeting, it was agreed that each riparian country should create its own National Network for Women in Fisheries. These four national networks were eventually combined into a regional network. This regional network is important for the users of the shared resources of the Mekong Region. Many of the people involved in this networking exercise participated in the Fifth Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiangmai, Thailand, November 1998, which included the first Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries.

Why Have These Discussions Arisen?

The discussions have attempted to undertake some key activities:

1. Evaluate the status of women in fisheries by exchanging information and experiences relevant to the Mekong Region
2. Show how the participants can improve the lives of women in fisheries through supportive programs (i.e., training opportunities, developing management skills, providing credit and loans, offering access to open communication and information services, etc.) that make women's lives more productive and fulfilling
3. Facilitate the establishment of national networks (including National Leagues of Women in Fisheries) and a regional network to coordinate comprehensive and joint activities. One of the priorities identified at the Can Tho meeting was to establish national networks in each of the countries, with the participation of both government agencies and NGOs.
4. Draft step-by-step action plans, including short-term actions and long-term expectations (such as providing equal opportunity to participate, equal access to education, resources, credit, etc.)

Establishing National Networks in the Mekong Region

With the assistance of the MRC Fisheries Programme, four countries in the Mekong Region held a series of meetings to establish National Networks for Women in Fisheries. The set-up of each national network is different since it corresponds to the modalities in the respective country. These networks presented opportunities to effectively utilise the human resources potential of women in fisheries in each country.

Owing to the severe economic crisis since July 1997, the respective governments needed time to identify the appropriate resources to set up the national networks. The following networks were established (in chronological order):

1. Cambodian Women in Fisheries Network established in October 1997
2. Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network established in March 1999 (officially endorsed in September 1999)
3. Lao Women in Fisheries Network established in October 1999
4. Thai Women in Fisheries Network established in February 2000 (restructured in October 2001)

In May 2000, after all four national networks were formerly established, the regional network was instituted at a meeting held in Phnom Penh by the MRC Fisheries Programme.

Objectives and Scope of the National Networks in the Mekong Region

The national networks focus on awareness-building through communication and exchange of ideas, experiences and approaches that improve the quality of life for women in fisheries in the Mekong Region, making their lives more productive and fulfilling.

As a first step, a way of raising awareness of the role of women in fisheries had to become socially and cultural acceptable in the respective countries. At the present time, there is still insufficient information on this topic. One output planned for the regional network will be a comprehensive Bibliography on Women in Fisheries. It is important to have a Mekong element within each national network to exchange information and train women at the regional level. The national networks also plan to formulate and implement specific projects to help the women in fisheries and associated members of their households, such as young children and the elderly, improve their daily lives. Thus, the networks not only address women, but also encompass children and the elderly, who all contribute to the fisheries.

In general, all four national networks have the following aims:

1. Information exchange/sharing
2. Increased awareness of women's role in fisheries
3. Research on women in fisheries issues
4. Enhanced gender sensitivity at the government level.

The scope of activities for all the national networks include:

1. Collecting information on research done to date on women in fisheries (per country)
2. Disseminating this information and responding to specific requests
3. Offer advice and training opportunities on gender research methodology
4. Maintaining a contact list of national network members and those supportive of its activities (per country)
5. Developing projects that improve the quality of life of women in fisheries and other members of their households (i.e., children and the elderly who all contribute to the fisheries sector in one way or another).

Structure of the National Networks in the Mekong Region

Focal Points

Each coordinating focal point of the four national networks is aware of which agency is doing what activities regarding women in fisheries in the respective country. For this reason, the focal point has an affiliated task force that assists in the undertaking of the following activities:

1. Compiles a directory of persons and agencies concerned with women in fisheries;
2. Serves as an information clearinghouse on women in fisheries;
3. Prepares and distributes a quarterly "Women in Fisheries" newsletter in the local language;
4. Develops a bi-lingual (local language and English) website for national and international users;
5. Formulates pilot projects to improve the quality of life of women in fisheries in the respective country;
6. Participates in national and international meetings concerned with women in fisheries;
7. Monitors the activities of specific working groups (i.e., training, research, information, monitoring and evaluation, etc.);
8. Calls periodic meetings of the Task Force; and
9. Performs other activities as necessary to ensure the smooth running of the national network.

Working Groups of each National Network on Women in Fisheries

As networking has basically to do with coordination of activities and gathering and sharing of information, working groups have been set up in the four countries to help gather basic data in the respective countries. The working groups focus on various aspects of women in fisheries:

- a. Identifying the problems of women in the fisheries sector in the respective country;

- b. Sharing experiences of the problem identification process;
- c. Gathering and exchanging information on women in fisheries through the establishment of an inventory of baseline data on women in fisheries according to their specific knowledge, education, experience, employment, standard of living, etc.;
- d. Sharing information within a national network to improve methodologies and verify research results; and
- e. Analysing information to contribute to a policy on women in fisheries in the respective countries, leading to future research topics and approaches.

Some basic activities aim at institutional strengthening - clarifying the overall spectrum of existing institutions, organisations, projects, people involved, and research activities in the respective countries.

Specific National Networks in the Mekong Region

Cambodian Women in Fisheries Network

Back in October 1997, a meeting to establish the National Network in Cambodia was convened at the Department of Fisheries with strong participation of women in fisheries in the country. The need to strengthen the exchange of information on women in fisheries was considered as a precondition for designing sound sectoral policies. The establishment of a National Network, which functions as a platform to share experiences and generate ideas, identify constraints and develop solutions for improved working and living conditions of the indigent women in the fishery sector, etc., is imperative for a country like Cambodia.

The main objective of the October 1997 meeting was to begin a thinking process about the needs and possibilities for setting up a National Network on Women in Fisheries in Cambodia among institutions and agencies involved in the fisheries sector. Subsequent meetings (held in the Khmer language) identified the necessary procedures to be followed.

Although there are a few articles describing women's participation in the fishery sector in Cambodia, the main question - "What are women's real problems in fisheries and how can these problems be addressed from a sectoral point of view?" - has so far not been satisfactorily answered. Moreover, the existing literature on women in fisheries in Cambodia does not always differentiate between issues related to the fishery sector per se and other sectors such as health and education, as well as to the more general cultural, sociological and political systems in the country.

Three things were realized in 2000-2001: (1) Meetings were held with other organizations in Cambodia (i.e., Agency for Women's Affairs, NGOs working with women and children, etc.); (2) Two field surveys were conducted to identify ways that the Cambodian Women in Fisheries Network can meet the needs of the women and make the best use of human and natural resources; and (3) Various NGOs (both international and local) such as Oxfam and Southeast Asian Outreach (SAO), and the UNDP project called SEILA (after a Cambodian word that means "boundary stone") were approached in Battambang, north-western Cambodia. A district meeting organized by the World Food Programme (WFP) and SEILA was held so that all department line agencies can collaborate to formulate a fisheries plan and undertake a "pilot project" for the women of Battambang.

Lao Women in Fisheries Network

The Department of Livestock and Fisheries (DLF) and the Lao Women's Union (LWU) in Vientiane coordinated the planning for the national network. The initial meeting was held in October 1999. Representatives from several provinces met together in Vientiane for the first time. They discussed the framework and set-up of the national network and the scope of work, plus an action plan for the years ahead.

The national network conducted a workshop on "Women's Role in Aquaculture and in Community Fishpond Management". Trainers from 18 provinces in the Lao PDR are being instructed. In this way, a core group of women are acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills on fisheries extension and conservation of natural aquatic resources to contribute to the fisheries development of the Lao PDR.

A database has been established on the women's role and activities in aquaculture, community fishpond management, traditional methods of processing aquatic resources, and capture fisheries. This database is being used to develop policies on women in fisheries in the Lao PDR and in the preparation of spin-off projects.

During the past year's work, the network collaborated with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations in the Nam Ngum Reservoir. Lacking funds for all members and activities of the network, the FAO project facilitated the sharing of information and strengthened the women in fisheries activities in the Lao PDR.

Thai Women in Fisheries Network

The Thai Women in Fisheries Network was established in February 2000. At that time, the network agreed upon the structural organization of the national network and the scope of work, as well as the future action plan.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Women's Affairs under the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand oversees the national network. The Department of Fisheries Sub-Committee on Women in Fisheries suggests the policy and prepares guidelines as well as the action plan for the development of the role of the national network. During the first year the Focal Point was at Chulalongkorn University. Since October 2001, the Department of Fisheries assumed this responsibility, assisted by a Task Force. Four Working Groups have been appointed for, respectively, Training, Research, Information, and Monitoring and Evaluation.

The Thai Women in Fisheries Network is harmonizing the different levels of influence in Thailand concerning women in fisheries (policymakers, extension officers, fisher women, etc.). Each level requires a different type of information. The Working Group for Information identified the agencies in Thailand that have some of these data and suggested how they can be repackaged and disseminated to the appropriate stakeholders.

The Task Force of the Thai Women in Fisheries Network met in October 2001. One aim of the meeting was to select a new Thai National Coordinator from the Department of Fisheries of Thailand.

A Seminar on Women in Fisheries Network Activities is planned for 2002. Five areas will be covered: 1) Structure of the network; 2) Research work on women in fisheries; 3) Training program for women in fisheries; 4) Extension work for women in fisheries; and 5) Information exchange among the members.

Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network

In Vietnam many different groups in the fisheries sector have been addressing the concerns of women in fisheries. However, these efforts would have greater impact if experiences were shared, lessons learned and activities coordinated. Networking among the different groups on women in fisheries is crucial to the development efforts in the country.

Since September 1997, the Ministry of Fisheries' Steering Committee for Women in Fisheries conducted a series of planning meetings. Different from the other national networks in the Mekong Region, Vietnam had already institutionalized a specific committee to address women in fisheries issues. In March 1999, the Embassy of Denmark in Hanoi funded a three-day meeting attended by women from all parts of Vietnam. This was the "Founding Meeting of the Women in Fisheries Network in Vietnam" held at the

Ministry of Fisheries. Some of the participants who had also participated in the Can Tho Round Table Discussion were joined by members of NGOs active in the field, along with others from the academic community and the private sector.

The overall aim of the national network is to help promote women's rights in fisheries through network building and organizing various groups involved in the fisheries sector. The nature of the national network is that of a multidisciplinary consortium bringing together the government, academic and private sectors.

The Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network has strengthened its focal point within the Ministry of Fisheries. It is conducting a socio-economic survey to record the status of women in fisheries throughout the country. Further, a pilot project on developing income-generating activities for women in fisheries is being tested in five fishing villages along the coastline of Vietnam.

At the end of 2000, a special festival honored outstanding post-harvest factory workers. This is in recognition of the hard work the women put into their factory jobs. A television documentary completed in June 2000 has been aired many times and repeated throughout 2001.

Funding the Networks in the Mekong Region

Various constraints are apparent in identifying core funding for the networks. For example, some participants may have been unable to attend prior women in fisheries meetings and may not have enough information at their disposal, nor the decision-making authority to represent their respective agencies. Sometimes the participants who do attend are already committed to many other activities and cannot undertake new tasks.

The MRC Fisheries Programme assisted 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 was emphasised, as well as assistance to standardise research methodology.

Running a network efficiently requires sufficient funding support. At this stage of initiating national and regional networks on Women in Fisheries, the MRC Fisheries Programme is providing some assistance to the interim coordination. It offers advice on how to approach possible donors who may have specific budget lines for networks and/or women (in fisheries) or gender-related interests.

Establishing a National Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

Background for the Network on Women in Fisheries

The declaration of the UN Decade for Women in 1985 stimulated activities that examined the roles and status of women in Filipino society and identified issues that needed to be addressed from the perspective of critical women's participation in national development. This exercise was done for many sectors: economic, education, media, and religion.

The same examination has also been undertaken in the fisheries sector, mainly through the initiation of such international organizations as the FAO and the UNDP. Although the Philippines has been represented in international fisheries workshops, such as the Women in Aquaculture (1987), one major Philippine initiative for women in fisheries was the Regional Workshop on the Role of Women in Fisheries Development held in Iloilo City, Philippines in July 1995. Jointly sponsored by the Government of the Philippines and UNDP, this forum was attended by delegates from 18 countries in Asia and the Pacific, who delivered papers on the involvement, perceived roles and issues pertinent to women in the development of fisheries. The set of resolutions emerging from this regional workshop was to be presented

at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. Unfortunately, no report pertinent to post-Beijing follow-through activities in the fisheries sector has been accessed in the Philippines.

In November 1998, the Asian Fisheries Society included for the first time a one-day symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries at its Fifth Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The international symposium invited papers that were a mixture of research studies, reviews and conceptual frameworks, and stimulated discussion among a diverse range of participants. One of the major recommendations from the Symposium was for the formation of networks at the national level that aimed at active participation from all sectors. A model of this, it was learned, comes from the formation of national networks in each riparian country in the Mekong Basin (see above).

The First Meeting of Advocates

The University of the Philippines in the Visayas (UPV), being the national center of fisheries education, had taken up the challenge of initiating the formation of a national network. Its chancellor had participated in the International Symposium and was inspired by the model provided by the Network for Women and Gender in Fisheries Development of the Mekong Region. This model served as a vehicle for catalyzing activities that would advocate for and advance the status of women in fisheries and addresses the problems these women encountered.

As an initial step, a UPV core committee identified key individuals in government agencies, non-government agencies, the academe, and research institutes. These key individuals have a stake and interest in the development of the fisheries sector, who recognize the significant and critical role that women can play in the sector's development, and can provide leadership in effecting needed change. Although the list was considerable, the resources to bring together this critical mass of individuals from all over the country were difficult to source. Finally, there was only enough to cover a total of 44 participants in Iloilo City in March 2000: 14 from government agencies, 19 from six state colleges and universities, 5 from research institutions, and 6 from non-government agencies and the private sector. Of these, close to half came from other provinces of the country and four were male participants.

The two-day seminar-workshop aimed to raise the awareness of the participants on the state of women in the fisheries world, to identify issues that need to be addressed, and to put together a plan of action to respond to these issues. The Undersecretary of Fisheries of the Department of Agriculture served as the Keynote Speaker. The papers presented consisted of an overview of women in fisheries in the Philippines; a socio-cultural analysis of the situation of women and children in a Muslim fishing community; a testimony of the multiple roles played by a female professor and researcher in fisheries; the experience of a female fish farmer whose backyard aquaculture enterprise (catfish hatchery and grow-out farm) supported her family and children's schooling; insights of a woman entrepreneur in the hatchery industry; experiences of women in the organization and operation of the women's cooperatives in the coastal areas in a Filipino province; NGO experiences in integrating gender concerns in their work with fishing communities using a co-management approach; and a piece which presented a non-stereotyped picture of fishing where the roles wives played include the maintenance of the fragile marine ecosystem of an island.

The consequent workshops discussed reactions to the presentations, explored the groups' vision for the women in fisheries network, and identified issues and actions to be prioritized and undertaken. Among the projected actions is the formation of a network within a year and the synthesis and dissemination of the conference-workshop proceedings and output.

Launching the Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

It took a full year for the group to meet for the launching of the network and close to eight months for the conference proceedings to be disseminated. The launching was a half-day affair in February 2001, scheduled to dovetail with events such as UPV's celebration of the founding anniversary of its College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences and the meeting of the national fisheries association. By so doing, costs were minimized as the network activity piggybacked on other more established activities. Most of those who attended the first activity were able to come; a few came for the first time. Two speakers presented papers on women in fisheries.

Premised on the plan of action identified during 2000, the formal launching of the network on women in fisheries took place using a ritual where attendees presented a fabric patch typical of their region of origin. A quilt was produced signifying the network.

Objectives of the Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

The stated network objectives are

1. To improve women's quality of life especially in the fisheries-involved communities through advocacy and networking;
2. To increase awareness of women's role in fisheries;
3. To generate information exchange among members and interested individuals and institutions;
4. To enhance gender sensitivity among fisheries-involved individual and institutions, especially at the government level;
5. To initiate and conduct gender-related activities through individual and collaborative approaches.

Structure of the Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

The Network will work towards a legal personality through incorporation and registration with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Annual membership dues and meetings were decided on and collected. The officers will consist of officers, zonal representatives (Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao) and representatives-at-large for the local government units, policy-making, and research.

Initial Activities of the Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

Since the election of Officers and the Board of the Network, two quarterly meetings have been held in June and September 2001. The initial issue of the network's newsletter, WINFISH, was published and distributed in August 2001. The constitution and bylaws have been written and registration with SEC has been completed. A one-year plan of action is being prepared, taking into consideration the issues raised in the 2000 meeting. The network has 60 members. A campaign for membership is also being undertaken. Preliminary planning for the 2002 annual membership meeting is on the way and is expected to be a business meeting and symposium. A publication with different stories on Women in Fisheries is being considered.

Factors that Facilitated the Formation of a Network

It took a year from the initial meeting among advocates for women in fisheries before a meeting of the network materialized. The initial meeting, despite resource constraints, easily attracted the participation of decision-makers and researchers who were the targeted leaders of the network. This drawing power

may be attributed to the level of awareness on issues of women in development, although not necessarily on women in fisheries. Professionals who had done research and development work involving women in the fisheries sector served as resource persons. Women who actually engage in fish farming and fish-related entrepreneurship also participated. Among those who provided financial assistance were two national agencies; one in fisheries and the other in marine research. At the local level, an environment regional agency, UPV and a research institute assumed certain costs. Although generally modest in amounts, the readiness with which such resources were extended, despite the short notice, is a reflection of the goodwill, awareness of and advocacy for which this topic enjoys. The conference-workshop ended on an optimistic note for plans ahead of the network.

After this first meeting when the participants returned to their respective busy professional and personal lives, the cudgels for implementing the plans and recommendations fell on the UPV core committee. Commitment from both individual faculty and the UPV, as an academic institution with a strong fisheries educational mandate, sustained the effort and brought it to the next steps - preparation and dissemination of proceedings and the launching of the network.

The active involvement of the regional directors of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources was critical and will continue to be significant in policy-making and in implementing future activities and projects. This bureau is at the forefront of the fisheries program implementation and policy development. Three of the directors are officers and members of the network's board.

The other officers of the Board have likewise demonstrated strong commitment to the goals of the network. They are strategically placed in their respective organizations and can galvanize the needed influence to advance these goals. Concrete outputs from the first six months of the network's existence are the formal incorporation of this organization and the issuance of the newsletter. The latter will serve to inform on relevant issues, developments and activities, thereby sustaining the links and communication among members.

Challenges Ahead for the Network on Women in Fisheries in the Philippines

In order to sustain the network, activities to enhance capacities of women in fisheries development and management will need to be initiated. Beyond meetings and conferences, the Network must make a difference – in addressing the problems encountered by women in fisheries, and advance a vision of empowered women in partnership with men at all levels of fisheries – especially in coastal and fish farming communities. These aims will be attained through interventions like research, community work, extension services, training, and networking.

Finding the resources to enable the network to affect these activities will be a real challenge. At present, the activities are accommodated within regular agency programs. However, for the network to firmly pursue its directions, it has to have access to its own program funds. The prospects for obtaining funds will be explored through grant writing, lobbying for a budget within agency funds, and generating resources for the network.

However, even given the current constraints in resources, the members of the network can advocate and recommend changes and undertake activities within their respective agency mandates that will enhance the participation of women in the fisheries sector. They can tap expertise from other members of the network and share resources that already exist. By so doing, they give meaning to the idea of networking, wherein the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.