

WOMEN'S ROLE IN FISHERIES – PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

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The role of women in fisheries has often been looked at from a post harvest perspective. The notion that women are not just marginal players but active participants in the fisheries production process is not new. However, the fact that there exists little information about women and their existing roles in the fisheries sector is something that cannot be denied. Further, the shift in thinking from women in fisheries to gender in fisheries is also an area that deserves attention. It was with the idea of examining these issues and addressing gender related concerns in the sector that a Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries was convened by the Asian Fisheries Society as part of the 6th Asian Fisheries Forum held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan between 25 to 30 November 2001.

While most of the papers presented provided baseline information on women in fisheries across the world, this Symposium provided opportunities for discussion on the pertinent issues, and planning the way to take these issues forward.

"Making Every African Fisher Count: Women Do Fish" from Africa deals with the generalizations that prevail, resulting in sweeping statements being made with respect to women involved in fishing. It brings out the situation in Africa where women are involved in active fishing and aquaculture. The Bangladesh experiences focus on development program interventions where traditional aquaculture practices are introduced to communities as livelihood options. The gender concerns in these programs and the strategies used to address them are discussed in detail. These issues are easily identifiable from an Indian perspective, as patriarchy in both countries has taken on similar dimensions.

Other papers in this volume deal with the more traditional roles of women - as fish processors. The paper on Women in Fisheries in Latin America examines the problems faced by women as sea food processors and processors within the artisanal sector. The lack of awareness of governments to the role and concerns of women in fisheries is cited as one of the major problems.

The Asian situation is fairly homogeneous within the South Asian region where women are only involved in the artisanal sector-their role being limited to traditional processing and marketing. The increasing mechanization of coastal fisheries and the resulting marginalization of women is highlighted.

While most of the papers presented are country-status papers, one of the interesting highlights is a paper from the Philippines "Working wives in Philippine coastal fisheries" which deals with the question of women's participation in fisheries from a supply end. It examines the variables that influence married women's involvement in the fisheries sector. The paper addresses the question of how women are able to improve their access to economic resources such that their labor supply decisions become favorable towards more paid work without their reproductive roles being compromised. The paper suggests that gender-responsive policies and legislation regarding fishing technology, storage, preservation and marketing would help in enhancing women's participation. Additionally, better access to the means of production will also increase and improve women's participation in this sector.

Although many issues were raised and the situations differed from country to country, the common thread running through all the papers is that provision should be made for women to be involved in production-related activities using aquaculture as an option. The Bangladesh experiences reinforce the fact that aquaculture as a livelihood option for women can be a successful intervention.

Another issue discussed in detail is the shift in perspective - from women in fisheries to gender in fisheries. Although this concept is not new to development, the symposium is probably the first forum in the fisheries sector which addresses these concerns. It was stressed that if program interventions in fisheries targeted only women, it would not elicit complete participation from the community as a whole. Also, men often look at these programs as "women's programs". The essential and strategic approach therefore is to look at gender in fisheries from a community angle-focusing on the power relations between men and women in the community-and planning the interventions with the community in a manner that promotes egalitarian relationships between men and women. The Bangladesh experiences show how this can be done effectively. Some of the program management questions in shifting from women to gender are also highlighted. As one of the participants from Oceania succinctly adds, " Having programs focused only on women in fisheries excludes and often gives the impression that it is a special program, which is the responsibility of one [women] staff member[s]". It is therefore vital to mainstream gender issues and build them into development interventions.

Another issue raised during the Symposium was that planners and senior fisheries personnel were often not clear about gender issues. Participants of the Symposium emphasized the importance of orientation and training of planners, fisheries personnel, and policy-makers as essential components to gender in fisheries.

The paper from Malaysia highlights the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among fishermen. 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 than were agricultural workers.

The issue of credit options for micro enterprises such as aquaculture for women was discussed. This was seen as a major constraint by many. However, in India with the success stories of micro credit through self-help groups this is not a limiting factor. In the State of Tamilnadu in India, there are numerous experiences of women who are very successfully using micro credit through their self-help groups for such activities. Where women's role in coastal fisheries is being marginalized and food security for the poor is being threatened, these efforts are worth replicating.

Another issue that cuts across continents is the limited information on women's roles in fisheries. Experiences of the Mekong River Commission in networking highlighted the advantages of networking efforts towards building an information database.

In India, there is tremendous scope for networking. Considering the fact that the NGO sector is active and has made successful interventions, there is a need for further collaborations with NGOs in the fisheries sector. Very few NGOs work with fishing and coastal communities. It was only after the disastrous efforts of shrimp monoculture farms that they paid more attention this sector. It is also observed that, often, attention to the fisheries sector tends to be only technical in nature. There is therefore a need for a flow of information across specializations and to look at the fisheries sector holistically.

To conclude, the Taiwan symposium on Women in Fisheries was one major step towards taking stock of the status of women involved in fisheries. It is however vital that this initiative moves forward and further work/research is initiated in the area of gender and fisheries - the inter relationship between men and women in the sector and their combined roles in natural resource management.