

REVIEW PAPER

Gender Issues in Small-Scale Fisheries: An Overview

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Globally, small-scale fisheries and fisheries-related activities (processing, trading, net-repairing, etc.) make an important contribution to the nutrition, food security, sustainable livelihoods and poverty alleviation of many countries, especially developing countries. Small-scale fisheries usually require only small capital investment, use low technology gear and vessels (often non-motorized) and catch fish for subsistence or local markets. The work is often part-time or seasonal and is a key component in the livelihoods of millions of people. Small-scale fisheries are found in coastal marine areas, brackish water lagoons, and along freshwater lakes, rivers and reservoirs.

In developing countries most fishing activities fall into the small scale fisheries sector employing roughly 37 million people, and directly affecting the livelihood, poverty prevention and alleviation, and food security of approximately 357 million others. Gender analysis in fishing communities is still in its infancy, and is mostly limited to the different occupational roles according to gender. The belief that men do the actual fishing, with women more involved in post-harvest and marketing activities, remains prevalent across most cultural, social, political and economic strata. Global average figures, which support this perception, mask the real importance of women at country level. In the world's two major fish producing countries, China and India, women represent respectively 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers (FAO 2012).

The increasing demand on the sector is met by both large-scale and industrial production systems and small-scale and artisanal production systems. Small-scale fisheries of all kinds are a major source of animal protein in many parts of the world. Poverty alleviation in small-scale fisheries presents a good area for exploring the merits of governance systems because of the way they are understood and conceptualized. For example poverty is typically understood as a problem and a cause of overfishing and resource degradation. This,

in the next instance, would suggest that addressing poverty must address the overfishing problem and the decisions and institutions that are established to manage fisheries.

It is common in the literature to come across statements such as “small-scale fisheries contribute to poverty alleviation and rural development through income generation and employment, and supply of food”, or sentences like “fisheries provide livelihoods to millions of dwellers, in particular in rural areas where the bulk of the poor live”. It is also frequently stated that small-scale fishery is a particularly pro-poor activity because it is an economic sector that is labor-intensive and relatively easy to enter -therefore providing livelihoods to a large number of unskilled people – including women through their involvement in fish processing activities.

Gender Mainstreaming

“Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.”

Small Scale Fisheries

Means persons that fish to meet food and basic livelihood needs, or are directly involved in harvesting/processing or marketing of fish, traditionally operate on or near shore fishing grounds, predominantly employ traditional low technology or passive fishing gear, usually undertake single day fishing trips, and are engaged in the sale or barter or are involved in commercial activity.

Small-scale fisheries take on a great number of forms and modes of operation in the countries and cultures in which they are found. They include the catching of fish, post-harvest treatment and marketing of the catches, as well as ancillary trades. For these reasons, it would be futile to formulate a universally applicable definition for a sector as dynamic and diverse as small-scale fisheries. Instead, it is preferable to describe the sub-sector on the basis of the range of characteristics that are likely to be found in any particular small-scale fishery.

Small-scale fisheries can be broadly characterized as a dynamic and evolving sub-sector of fisheries employing labor-intensive harvesting, processing and distribution technologies to exploit marine and inland water fishery resources. The activities of this sub-sector, conducted full-time or part-time or just seasonally, are often targeted on supplying fish and fishery products to local and domestic markets and for subsistence consumption. Export-oriented production, however, has increased in many small-scale fisheries during the last one to two decades because of greater market integration and globalization. While typically men are engaged in fishing and women in fish processing and marketing, women are also known to engage in near shore harvesting activities and men are known to engage in fish marketing and distribution. Other ancillary activities such as net-making, boat-building, engine repair and maintenance, etc. can provide additional fishery-related employment and income opportunities in marine and inland fishing communities (FAO, 2004).

Small-scale fisheries operate at widely differing organizational levels ranging from self-employed single operators through informal micro-enterprises to formal sector businesses. This sub-sector, therefore, is not homogenous within and across countries and regions and attention to this fact is warranted when formulating strategies and policies for enhancing its contribution to food security and poverty alleviation.

Small-scale fisheries make an important contribution to nutrition, food security, sustainable livelihoods and poverty alleviation – especially in developing countries. Despite this significant contribution, the issues constraining the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries remain poorly understood.

Small-Scale Fishermen

“Small-scale” and “artisanal” fishermen are overlapping terms that cover a very wide range of fish producers who use an equally wide range of fishing technology. In particular, one must recognize the great difference between small-scale fishermen in developed countries with a relatively high level of income and living standards, and artisanal fishermen in developing countries. The former are small-scale producers who often use the most advanced fishing technology and electronics on board, however small their quite advanced fishing craft. The latter, mostly poor fishermen make their living by operating low-investment boats and fishing equipment. The fish they catch are processed and marketed by hard working women who often suffer from eye diseases and even loss of sight from working in a smoky environment. Most of them live in remote, coastal communities where living standards and the quality of life keep them at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Malnutrition, poor health and short life expectancy are common in many fishing villages, especially those that are remote.

Livelihoods in Small Scale Fishing Community

Small-scale fishing communities are sustained by fishing livelihoods, which require community members' sustained access to fisheries capital. In this regard, the important types of fisheries capital include the following: (a) natural capital, that is, marine ecosystems and the living species they support; (b) physical capital, including fishing vessels, gear, landing sites, and processing and marketing facilities; (c) financial capital for sustaining operations, provisioning various items of physical capital, and supporting other social and economic activities, and sometimes for sustaining or enhancing natural capital as well; and (d) human social and cultural capital, including human skills and information utilized in fisheries activities, as well as broader accumulated knowledge containing guidance for how to go about living in general.

In most small-scale fishing communities there are also usually other alternative livelihoods which are supported by the sorts of capital that are particular to them and which are likewise integrated in the community's social and cultural fabric. Usually a community's alternative livelihoods

support and complement one another, with community members collectively having more security by virtue of there being more alternatives available to them. But it is also possible that some of the alternative livelihoods may compete for the various sorts of capital that support fishing livelihoods. Other demands for water resources, such as those prompted by developing agriculture, tourism and mariculture, for example, may work hardships on the members of a fishing community.

In various parts of the world today prevailing cultural ideas about the utilization of natural resources are also in a state of rapid change, being constantly mediated and revised as a result of emerging environmental conflicts. On the one hand, some people still continue to press for growth and development, wishing to see their livelihoods enhanced even though the growth they desire cannot be sustained on a long-term basis. On the other, an increasing number of people, groups, and emergent subcultures, which point to various environmental abuses that have happened in the past, now press for a far less intensive utilization of natural resources. And taken to their extremes, both of these positions may radically alter the capital that is potentially available for sustaining the livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities.

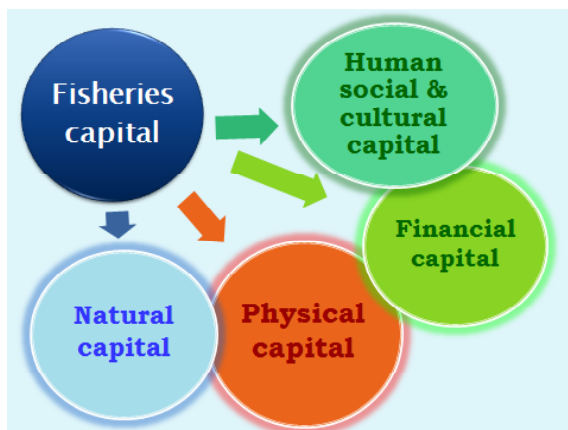


Fig. 1. Gender issues in Fisheries

Balanced, equitable and sustainable development of the fisheries sector must take all social groups into account. However, the role of women in the sector has, for a long time, gone unrecognized and their voice is heard rarely among managers, policy makers and legislators.

Gender is used to describe all the socially given attributes, roles, activities and responsibilities connected to being female or male in a given society.

It is one marker among others such as age, race, ethnicity, class, disability, connections, education and sexual orientation etc. that determines status. The involvement of both men and women in fisheries and aquaculture is evident in all of the locations. Fishing and harvesting from aquaculture is practiced by male household members but women also often play an important role. In several of the small fish pond culture and hatchery operations visited by the mission the women of the household either managed the operation or were engaged in routine management operations, such as feed preparation and/or feeding.

The fisheries sector has long been considered a male domain, signifying a sense of adventure and risk valued by men. However, women's involvement in fisheries is more significant than often assumed and, according to estimates from nine major fish producing countries, they comprise 47% of the labour force in small-scale capture fisheries-related activities. While men typically fish from larger boats for longer periods of time, women, particularly in the developing world are engaged in small-scale local fisheries, gleaning for shellfish or seaweeds, net repairs, fish processing and local marketing. Offshore fishing may be still be "a man's world" but inland it is often women who are more actively engaged, fishing in ponds, lakes, streams and rivers. 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.

There are many reasons why gender issues have been neglected; some are because the concept of fisheries was limited to direct fishing activity, some concern gender stereotypes and others the disproportionately few numbers of women in academia and in government.

1. In the past, much of the research activity in the fisheries sector focused on developing technologies for enhancing the productivity of capture fisheries and aquaculture — rural livelihoods and social structure, received little attention from researchers.
2. The few social scientists working in the field regarded the household as a single unit and their research centered around fishing households rather than on the role of individuals within these families.
3. There is a stereotype perception that women

are physically weak and therefore unsuited to the physical demands of fishing.

4. Another stereotype perception is that women are not technically minded and therefore incapable of grasping new technologies.
5. The low proportion of women in Departments of Fisheries at all levels, including decision making levels.

Important of gender issues in fisheries

In addition to the obvious concerns about fairness, equal opportunity and discrimination, there are good reasons why effective and efficient development of the Mekong's fisheries must take the role of women in the sector into account.

1. Women make significant contributions to fishery-related activities other than fishing. They play the major role in processing fish and fishery products, as well as in marketing. Although these roles are often very different to those of men, they are integral parts of the industry and ignoring these activities means ignoring a large portion of the sector.
2. The different work done by women generates different kinds of knowledge. So, for example, while men may know which stretches of river have the best fishing, women know the price these fish will fetch in the market. These kinds of knowledge are often complementary — in this example knowing where to catch the highest value fish. Only with knowledge of both women's and men's opinions and expertise can we understand the fishery sector in its entirety, and manage its development appropriately.
3. The under-representation of women in decision making takes away a large portion of the available pool of expertise — from both the government and the community.
4. The increasing trend of men migrating from fisheries to other work means that women will have to fill their roles.

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