

# Fewer fish, ageing fishers

## Declining incomes and ageing villages mean that women are likely to be the mainstay of families and communities in the small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia

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In the last few decades, attention on and analysis of women in fisheries and aquaculture have changed tremendously, especially in Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, just talking about women's role in fisheries was considered to be new. Later on, women in the fisheries network emerged with the leadership of the Mekong River Commission, and Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries symposiums started to be organized. However, the discussion was mainly around gender division of labour. 'Women do fish' was the focus of many of the studies and articles during that time. The perspectives based on political economy that discussed the rights of women to resources as well as to decision making came much later. Our better understanding on what it means to be women fishers or women's experience in fishing communities, and how women and men would be affected differently from conservation policies, trade policies, as well as through climate change, had to wait nearly a decade to reach the mainstream.

At the same time, under a different stream, women in small-scale fish processing as well as in fish processing industries have been studied not under the framework of women and fisheries but more under the framework of women factory workers and women's home-based micro enterprises. Studies covering workers in fish factories, especially the migrant women workforce, raised concerns with regard to the sheer numbers of workers, their poor working conditions and lack of labour rights. Gender relations surrounding their employment and families were analysed. Studies that documented the piece rate and casual/informal nature of their employment that sometimes included unpaid family workers, especially children, helped in raising awareness of the plight of these workers. However, the issue here was more on working conditions rather than on fishing itself.

The research on women fish traders, especially those linked to value chains, started to increase. The issue of value chain analysis came up as an exciting opportunity to highlight women's role in fishing industries, as well as how women were affected by the general economic policies that affect both fish industries and other trades. Another focus area was nutrition. In studies on the nutritional values of small fish, women utilising small fishes for meals presented

a focus for research. Although these nutrition projects were gender biased in the sense that they strengthened women's role as cooks in the family, they also highlighted women's role in improving the well being of poor fishing families. On the other hand, women's role in small-scale aquaculture was studied more in relation to women in agriculture, and as part of the diversification of small-scale farming through backyard fish raising.

In Southeast Asia, there is very little organizing among fishers, probably because many fishers in this region combine farming and fishing and there are few full-time fishers, or they are scattered if they exist, unlike in South Asian countries. Such scattered nature of fishers in Southeast Asia has also led to lower presence of women from fishing communities in the women's movement. Most part-time fishers identify themselves as farmers, and fishing is considered as part of their secondary income. The only full-time fishers are coastal fishers (except for some in the Tonle Sap floating villages), and these coastal villages are often not targeted for development projects because of their relatively higher income compared to inland small-scale farmers. The scattered nature of the fishers has not attracted labour organizations that tend to focus on organizing factory workers.

The marginal interest in women in fisheries started to change in this millennium with researchers and practitioners starting to link the different issues related to women in fisheries. This led to a rise in studies on the impact of climate change and migration, rise in interest on value chain, as well as the gender differentiated impact of policy responses to climate change and migration to fishing communities. This in turn helped in looking at gender in fisheries from broad and diverse perspectives that attracted more researchers.

Southeast Asia, especially mainland Southeast Asia, is experiencing a decrease in fish resources due to a drop in water levels and erratic climate phenomena, over-fishing and illegal fishing, pollution, dam construction and sand mining, as well as coastal investment of industry and tourism, etc. Aside from such push factors, there are pull factors that attract youth to move out of fishing as a profession to look for other jobs in urban areas. Urbanisation



Cambodian women migrant fishworkers sorting fish in Thailand. In Southeast Asia, there is very little organizing among fishers, probably because many fishers in this region combine farming and fishing and there are few full-time fishers.

is creating more employment in factories and service sectors. Young people, faced with limited options in fishing communities, are moving out of fishing and opting for manufacturing and service sector employment. This is even more so for women. For factory work and service sector work, there are more jobs for young women, even though (or because) it is less paid. For men, they need to move out to larger cities to work. Even though the price of seafood is on the increase, the squeeze in fishing area is affecting full time fishers. A similar or even worse trend is seen among those in inland areas like Tonle Sap in Cambodia. For inland fishers, fishing is an important income to supplement meagre farming incomes, and that is getting more and more difficult to sustain.

The decrease in fishing income has pressured women and children to support the household finance through greater engagement in non-fish employment. For example, it has been seen in coastal Cambodia that increasingly more women are working in garment factories and casinos near their fishing villages to support their fishing households. Older women who cannot go for factory work are increasingly engaged in piece rate fish processing work such as crab meat picking. But these incomes are not enough to keep the youth in, and the average age of fishing communities is rising rapidly.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)/Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) regional consultative workshop on demographic changes in fishing communities in Asia held in November 2019 highlighted the phenomenon of ageing in Asia's fishing communities. Case studies in Thailand and Cambodia showed the decreasing trend in the number of fishers as well as the increasing trend

of ageing in fishing communities compared to the national average in these two countries. For instance, in Thailand, the Trat province, where the long coastal line allows many fishers to make a living, consistently had a slightly higher than the national average percentage of population aged 60 and above, over the last ten years. In 2018, Trat had 16.4 per cent of population above age 60 while the national average is 16.1 per cent. In Cambodia, while the national average of population above age 60 and above is 7 per cent, districts with a higher fishing population have proportions ranging from 7.8 to 9.5 per cent.

The ageing fishing communities continue to fish, since their identity as fishers are strong. However, the elderly fishers cannot manage larger fishing boats and will have to shift to smaller boats. In future, middle sized boats may no longer exist and there will be only small and large sized boats. At the same time, there will be increasing need for elderly care in communities in countries where elderly care services and support are almost non-existent. Prevailing gender norms will put higher pressure on daughters to come back and look after ageing parents.

When we examine broad changes in women's roles in fishing communities, we see how women supported small-scale fishing first by providing supplementary income to maintain livelihoods as fishers, and later on, by supporting aged fishers through elderly care. The role of women in these fishing communities is getting more and more important. Women are less mobile than men in fishing and they might become the mainstay in these fishing communities. In that sense, it is important that women are given the power to manage the fishing resources so that they will be able to create a sustainable livelihood in these fishing communities. ❖

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