

Overview of women's roles in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan

India

Some 3.52 million fishers and family members who belong to 756 212 households live in 3 202 marine fishing villages of India. Among men, the major fishery-related occupations are labour (39.2%), net-mending (28.6%) and marketing (14%). The major women's occupations are marketing (41.8%), labour (18.4%) and curing/ processing (18%). Women dominate in fish marketing (73.6%), while men dominate in net-repair and net-making (nearly 80%) and in providing labour to fishing boats (69.5%).

Sustaining fishing communities in India communities has been the task of women, who not only play the role of wife and mother, but who contribute substantially in many ways to the income of the family. In stages of harvest, women fishworkers perform the following: **pre-harvest** - making and mending nets, preparing hooks with bait, pond preparation, seed collection, and feeding; **harvest** - clam and mussel picking, collecting seaweed and pearl diving; and **post-harvest** - fish vending, processing (salting and drying), oil extraction and they also work as labourers in the processing plants.

As is true in other sectors, the contribution of women in the fisheries sector is not taken seriously by the State. Not only does the State not have any data on women but rarely, if at all, are any budget allocations made to support the work of women in fisheries.

Bangladesh

There are 1,320,480 people employed in fisheries in Bangladesh. Traditionally women did not have access and control over resources like land, knowledge, cash and tools. The social position of women was so inferior to that of men that women had little or no influence on the decision-making process. Lack of access and control over cash income perpetuated the myth that women's work was less important than men's. Fishing was an activity traditionally reserved for Hindu males, with the exception of some widows and older women in the southern part of the country. In 1996, fishing was the second most important occupation outside the agricultural sector, yet only 3 % of working women fished (Sultana *et al.*, 2002). However, women now actively participate in both fishing and in resource management. New markets have also allowed women to gain access to coastal resources. Aquaculture has created a demand for shrimp fry and many women, regardless of religion, age and marital status, now catch shrimp fry, e.g., along the coast of Bangladesh. Women and children comprise 80 % of the workforce in shrimp fry collection (Sultana *et al.*, 2002).

Women in Bangladesh play a significant role in the small-scale fisheries sector. About 30% of women in rural and coastal areas are directly or indirectly engaged in small-scale fisheries. Of the total employed in the fisheries sector, about 10-12% are women. The major areas of women's involvement are aquaculture, shrimp culture, fish processing, net, gear and craft making. Though women in Bangladesh, similar to their counterparts in the region, are not involved in active fishing from the sea, they participate in certain forms of fishery as a family along with the men. In parts of Bangladesh, where women are involved in fishing, it is only through activities such as shrimp seed and fish fry collection and mostly it is only women from the poorest families who get involved as fry collectors. In Bangladesh, women who are involved in the fresh fish trade are usually old or divorced and almost all of them belong to the Hindu fishing communities.

Though Bangladesh has a fisheries sub-sector in its National Plans since 1973, the focus on women has been negligible. It was only since the sixth national plan that the scope was broadened to include fishing communities, which paved the way for the inclusion of women. However, the 1998 National Fisheries Policy does not mention the strategy to improve women's participation in fisheries despite having it as an objective.

Sri Lanka

Out of a fishing population of 547,523 there are 148,167 employed in fisheries in Sri Lanka. A key issue in the fisheries sector is the role and status of the wives and other women in fishing families. There is evidence of positive developments from the women's perspective. Fish handling, grading and processing for local markets principally involve women and there is some evidence that they are becoming more active in these activities. Earlier, shore-based post-harvest fisheries activity provided certain opportunities for women. Their roles were traditionally important because they were the processors and handlers of fish for the domestic market. However, these traditional roles have been to support the male fishers, as economic partners to their spouses. Cultural barriers have strictly controlled the women's behaviour and participation. They are also highly affected by collapses in the industry but have very little role in resource management.

Pakistan

There are 272,273 people employed in fisheries in Pakistan. In the past women usually accompanied their male family members on fishing trips. There was no major division of work. The whole family was usually engaged in fishing, cleaning and drying. Women were also engaged in the sell of fish in the local as well as remote markets. Women also used to fish in the shallow waters of the coastal areas. However, with the commercialization of fisheries and expansion of the sector, women were slowly and gradually pushed out of the process and activities. Hence the role of women of the fishing community has almost come to an end. The Pakistan government has done little for the fisherwomen and their livelihoods. Fisherwomen are not mentioned anywhere in government policy documents/legislations/laws.

Maldives

The country relies virtually on two sectors – tourism and fisheries. While the contribution of fisheries has been declining over time, it remains vital to the economy, because it is the main provider of food items and employment in a number of atolls. In the Maldives, fishing activities and harvesting marine life in the oceans, lagoons or reef flats are performed exclusively by men. Post-harvesting activities aimed at adding value, such as salting and drying fish, are the domain of women. Forty-five species of reef fish are commercially important; the salted and sun-dried reef fish are exported. With the progressive mechanization of the fishing industry and a shift in the external demand for dried and salted fish, women's employment in fish-processing industries has declined sharply. On the atolls, women's share of the economically active population fell in 1990, before increasing again in 1995. In 1995, two sectors dominated employment on the atolls – manufacturing, which accounted for up to 50 percent of female employment; and fishing, which represented 34 percent of male employment.

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