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Girl in a fish market, Pusan,
South Korea





Introduction to this special issue on Women and Labour

As the fisheries and aquaculture sector discusses major policy changes – forced labour at sea, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU), COVID-19 – women’s work is often overlooked, too easily wiped out of public view, receiving very little attention or support. When women’s labour is examined, this attention is rather piecemeal and descriptive. The articles in this issue of *Yemaya* are drawn from the presentations and discussions at the webinar, ‘Women Work in Fisheries, Too!’ Held on 29 November 2021, the webinar identified areas that respond to the inaccurate and inadequate portrayal of women’s work in Asian fisheries. The webinar was part of the 8th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries and the US Agency for International Development Sustainable Fish Asia Local Capacity Development (USAID SUFIA LCD) Activity’s initiative to increase awareness and action on women and labour in fisheries. It was co-organised by the USAID SUFIA LCD, Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section (GAFS) of the Asian Fisheries Society, Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security (CTI-CFF), ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute and Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT).

The GAFS is a professional society focused on gender research and related activities that help advocate for the advancement of women in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. USAID SUFIA LCD focuses on strengthening regional capacities and collaboration in combating IUU fishing, promoting sustainable fishing practices, and addressing labour issues and insights along the fisheries value chains, including land-based fisheries workers who are mostly overlooked. The CTI-CFF wishes to raise awareness of women’s contributions, using a gender equality and social inclusion and gender mainstreaming approach in marine biodiversity conservation, sustainable fisheries, and climate change adaptation. In its fisheries research and development work ICAR-CIFT recognises that women are vital in marketing and fish processing, comprising a large workforce that is often not well organised to advocate for better outcomes.

Arlene Nietes Satapornvanit and Meryl J Williams write that a shared understanding on gender and labour in fisheries would benefit from defining “some basic terms commonly used when applying a gender lens to activities in fish value chains, fisheries statistics, policies and interventions”. Nikita Gopal illustrates the shortcomings of definitions by examining women’s fishing in India, for which “no data or official records of women doing fishing” exist. Yet, recent studies find that women are often engaged in small-scale fishing, earning incomes and also feeding families. In studies in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand that considered all workers, Jariya Sornkliang state: “we did not find any value chain in which all workers were of just one gender.”

Ravadee Prasertcharoensuk recommends practical strategies to make women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an important part of marine and coastal policies and plans, without which “the gender gaps in marine and coastal biodiversity management will only widen”. Joe Pres Gaudio shares that women cope with stress, debt-burden, and extra work to make ends meet, and are the lead decision-makers regarding household finances, whether their fisher husbands are at sea or on land.

In the case of businesses in fisheries and other food and beverage sectors, Caterina Meloni found that “investor’s demands, regulatory pressure and customer demands drive the growing importance of the gender dimension”, but “that advancing gender equality in the workplace is not a linear process”. It can be slower than foreseen. Indeed, Rachel Matheson pointed out that gender was the “glaring omission” from the certifications, codes of conduct, and non-profit partnerships happening in the sustainable seafood movement.

As Aazani Mujahid in her presentation indicated, women in coastal communities involved in food production should be given opportunities to become entrepreneurs, start up their own SMEs, and expand their small-scale businesses through selling both online and offline.

We recognise that this is still just a start, but, in the next five years, we hope there will be a much deeper understanding of women’s work. To synthesise and elaborate the issues raised at the webinar, the partners are now developing a Cooperative Action Plan, assisted by an expert writing team in consultation with the webinar attendees. ❏

———— GAFS team