

Women's voice and identity

A development model driven solely by profit is eroding the small-scale fisheries and marine and coastal ecosystems in Thailand

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The decades of so-called 'development' and discourses of fisheries modernisation and blue growth have failed to uplift small-scale fishers and address gender inequality. Instead, they have led to environmental damage, social and cultural disruption widened gender inequality, and increased the violation of human and collective rights. The economic-driven policies are unlikely to ensure sustainable development but rather, they will create tensions between the environment and natural resource dependent communities. Employment is reduced; landlessness increased; community commons privatised; food security decreased; health and well-being have been negatively impacted; and acts of intimidation and violence are commonly witnessed. In all this, women in small-scale fisheries and in traditional coastal communities have suffered. Women fishers are still bearing the brunt of the costs of gender differences and inequality. The negative impacts on women have resulted in persistent poverty. Pro-people, gender mainstreaming perspectives are urgently needed on the questions of livelihood, coastal

and marine commons governance, social justice, and ecological sustainability, in order to ensure that communities have full sovereignty over natural resources.

Marine and terrestrial ecosystems are an abundant source of social and economic benefits to human societies. They provide livelihood to many small-scale fishing communities whose ways of living have been connected to rivers, coasts and oceans. The communities' wisdom and knowledge of ecology and fishing are integral to the way they govern their ecosystems. Small-scale fisher communities, which support the majority of people in the fisheries sector, are dependent for their living on fishing as a principal source of income and nutrition. They engage in fishing from generation to generation. Some of them also manage small coastal aquaculture enterprises for an additional source of food and income.

The present growth-driven economic approach to fisheries and aquaculture which is based on exploiting ecosystems has caused conflict among resource users. Marine coastal resources have deteriorated as a result of the use

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Women mending fishing gear, Thailand. Women's rights as sea-going fishers have not been recognised, and the roles of women in post-harvest value addition and sales have been ignored

of destructive fishing gears and capital intensive investments in coastal regions including the expansion of large-scale aquaculture in which the participants may be non-fishers. The fishers' coastal common properties are leased out to corporate firms or other private entities for profit-oriented commercial purposes such as manufacturing industries, tourism, power plants, and other infrastructural projects. Export-oriented industrial fishing has looted marine resources leaving fishing grounds to resemble deserts. As a result, small-scale fishers experience food insecurity, insecure livelihoods and low family incomes. Customary rights over the marine and coastal resources of sea, river and land have been eroded as governments now hold the majority of rights. Small-scale fishers, especially women fishers, have not been recognised nor meaningfully involved in either fishery or coastal resource management.

In fishing communities, the household usually functions as an economic unit where the roles of both men and women are complementary. Fishing is however seen as a male activity despite women playing critical and significant roles in fish production. Women work in direct productive activities including collecting, processing, preparing and marketing of fish and other marine resources. In addition, they play an indirect role in the fishing economy in terms of caring for and nurturing their children. However, these contributions are often unacknowledged or undercounted in employment data. Women are not included as fishers in the formal statistics and a large part of their work is unaccounted in economic valuations.

Policy directions promoting the fishing industry have created many problems for the small-scale fishing sector and for women fishers, who constitute the most vulnerable and invisible sections of fishing societies. Industrial fishing has diminished the role of women in fisheries and their involvement in the collection and culturing of molluscs, crustaceans, shells, oysters and other edible products in the coastal ecosystems. Women's rights as sea-going fishers have not been recognised, and the roles of women in post-harvest value addition and sales have been ignored, allowing them to be displaced by more prominent traders in the commercialised harbour-based global fish trade. The overall disempowerment of coastal communities and small-scale fishers impacts women in unique ways as the burden of adaptation falls upon them. Yet, their voices are seldom heard.

The devastation of coastal and marine capture fisheries resulted in unemployment, forced migration and exclusion of women fish workers. Traditional marine fishers were forced into culture fisheries for livelihoods. From being self-employed many fishers have been forced

into becoming workers in industrial companies where they generally occupy floor-level jobs, such as in seafood factories, and as contract workers in unskilled categories of work. This has also led to the further marginalisation of women who have no social protection against livelihood loss.

Women who used to be direct producers or sellers of seafood would first keep aside a portion of the fish for family consumption and then sell the remainder. With the decline of capture fisheries and the lack of opportunities in culture fisheries, these once self-employed women are now being forced into daily wage labour. Women in the fisheries sector are worse off as a result of the present economic model and the capital intensive growth in marine and coastal ecosystems that is wiping out marine and coastal resources. In addition to climate change and extreme weather events, these trends have threatened the livelihood and food security of small-scale fishers, particularly women.

The disproportionately negative impact on women is due to gendered cultural stereotypes that ascribe greater working burdens to women while restricting their access to resources, decision-making and participation in collective governance.

The prevailing development paradigm has shifted power away from traditional community-level governance mechanisms and into the hands of nation-state mechanisms driven by market interests. Fishing coastal communities have lost their sovereignty and are reduced to the status of environmental refugees in their own nations.

Evidence shows that the macroeconomic development paradigm has gradually resulted in a massive dislocation and displacement of traditional coastal communities towards harbour-based capital-intensive fisheries. This has damaged rivers, and riverine and coastal ecosystems, impacting the ways of living and livelihoods of small-scale fishers. Their exclusion from decision making processes has increased their vulnerability and workload and generated greater stress for women fishers looking after the health and nutrition of families and communities.

The result is a sea-change in the systems of knowledge, ecology and political economy vital for the prosperity and well-being of coastal communities and small-scale fishers, including women. The integrated nature of riverine, coastal, land and marine ecosystems has been totally absent in the mainstream public and policy discourse. Discussions on fisheries stock depletion and 'over-fishing' have overlooked these on-land anthropogenic factors. Resource depletion is a result not just of bad policy and destructive projects but also of the erosion of the right of local communities to govern resources

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of which they were once the traditional custodians. Closely related to community governance of resources is food sovereignty. With the gradual destruction of small-scale fisheries, scores of families go without essential nutrients, and the reasonably better off become dependent on external markets for food. Thus, households are no longer in control of their own nutritional needs, and are increasingly dependent on markets or government welfare schemes. This brings into focus the question of food sovereignty where control of nutrition is being snatched away from the primary producer and the end consumer.

If national policies, plans and measures lack a gender perspective, they fail to recognise that women and men while sharing some basic needs also have other, divergent needs, interests, knowledge, skills and responsibilities concerning the use and management of coastal and marine resources. Practical strategies are therefore needed to make women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an important part of marine and coastal policies and plans. Without

these, the gender gaps in marine and coastal biodiversity management will only widen.

These challenges need a multi-pronged and holistic set of responses. Alternatives to the current paradigm of macroeconomic development are needed, as are workable solutions and strategies for the struggles that lie on the path. It is towards this goal that small-scale fishery networks envision the need for greater sovereignty over coastal commons for their primary stakeholders and advocate for an overall restructuring of resource governance. This aims at reversing the role of the state from ownership to custodian by bringing policy and legislative changes to protect and promote the traditional rights of coastal communities under international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), as well as national and state-specific legislations. ❏