

Reflections on Women and Fisheries Labour

A range of critical issues confront women in small-scale fisheries, the most basic being the under-recognition of women's contributions

By **Kyoko Kusakabe**
(kyokok@ait.ac.th),
Professor of Gender
and Development
Studies, Asian Institute of
Technology, Thailand

Since the 1990s, there has been an increased awareness that women do fish. However, there still is a deep-seated perception that “real” fishing is done by men while women merely play a supportive role. Such under-recognition of women's work stems from the invisibility of women's contribution to fisheries.

Many gender-sensitive researchers studying fisheries have highlighted the invisibility of women and the under-valuation of women's contribution in fisheries. First of all, the problem stems from the fact that very little data is gender disaggregated. Second, fisheries data focuses on men's activities, and often do not record activities that women are concentrated in, such as gleaning, catching fish in small traps and processing for home consumption. There is still a strong perception that men are the fishers and women are home-makers. Third, time use difference of women and men can lead to invisibility of women's contribution to fisheries. Although women fish, the length of time that they can spend on fishing can be less than men, since they need to look after household work, care for the children and often tend the backyard garden for household food security. Such time restrictions limit the places that women can go for fishing. Still there are women who spend considerable amounts of time fishing, but again, because of general perceptions, they are not seen as fishers. Fourth, the type of fishing that women do is often invisible. Women's fishing activities are often seen as an extension of household work, catching fish for home consumption and gleaning in between their household responsibilities. Such form of fishing contributes to the perception that women are not fishing since these are part of their unpaid family work.

However, the efforts by women fishers and gender-sensitive researchers and practitioners have helped to highlight women's roles and contribution. Gender disaggregated data counting the number of women and men fishers and showing large numbers of women engaged in fishing, is beginning to be made available. The value chain approach has highlighted the role that women play as retailers and processors, as well as their role in non-fisheries work that supplements the family income from fisheries and allows the family to continue to rely on fishing as their livelihood. There are projects that helped improve fish processing techniques and introduced certification schemes so that women's groups are able to access niche, or better, markets. There are also more studies on women workers in fish processing factories and their working conditions. Women's groups have come

together to demand support from government after the occurrence of disasters even as their governments only supported men's fishing activities through providing boat and gears. However, data collection mechanisms as well as budget allocation by governments have still not substantially changed in ways that recognize women's fisheries work on par with those of men.

One of the difficulties in systematically addressing women's contribution in fisheries is the diversity of women's involvement. What women do and how they are involved in fisheries is context specific and differs by location, age, ethnicity, education level, by season and by the stage of life they are in. Therefore, it is essential to include all these circumstantial factors in the analysis. The intersectional disadvantage of certain groups of women also needs to be taken into consideration. Women in female-headed households might face a greater disadvantage than do women in male-headed households since the former do not have enough labour to benefit from fisheries. It is also recognized that women's groups are not a panacea for all circumstances, though they are useful and effective under certain situations. Some women are not able to join women's groups. Some might not join because they do not need to while others cannot because do not have enough resources in terms of time and money. Further, power relations and benefits can be unequally distributed within the group.

The most popular strategy to integrate women into fisheries projects is to improve participation of both women and men in project activities. Fishing organizations are notoriously male dominated. In many cases, especially when membership is household based, it is the men who are fishing organization members. Organizational membership can sometimes lead to benefits such as access to loans and information, as well as direct access to governments in terms of their collective issues as fishers. Women are often excluded from this formal mechanism. However, improving women's participation is not as simple as just including them as members in the fishing organizations. Participation is guided by gender norms, and thus the strategies to increase women's quality participation needs to be different from place to place. Women need to be seen not as victims but as citizens and treated as such. They need to be given the space for themselves to air their opinion and make decisions.

COVID-19 has created some opportunities for women in fisheries. Women selling processed fish products were able to benefit from the expanded online market during the pandemic. However, several negative aspects have also



Fishes caught from the rice fields system support the livelihoods of many Cambodian communities. Selling fish at homeplace has a direct impact on families income generation

Under-recognition of women's roles stems from the invisibility of women's contribution to fisheries

been noted. The setback to the tourism sector has affected many women who were selling fish or processed fish products to tourists. Women who worked in tourism-related activities in coastal and riverside areas lost their customers. With the general economy going through crisis, women fish vendors face many difficulties selling fish since their customers are often in the lower income brackets. The disruption in logistics has made it difficult for women fish vendors to access buyers who will transport fish to other areas. The pandemic has also hit the fish processing factories where women work in numbers, and many have lost their jobs.

Aside from the fishing-related damage, women's workloads at home have increased due to school closures and men not being able to work outside the home. Looking after family members and children's education has increased the pressure on women's time. If one of the family members gets sick, women's time is further squeezed as they need to serve as care takers of the sick family members. Women get less access to government subsidies under the pandemic, since they work in the informal economy and are not eligible for such subsidies.

Labour migration is an important issue in gender and fisheries as well. Cross border migrant workers, especially Burmese and Cambodian migrant workers working in Thailand are often not originally from the fishing communities. They come to Thailand to work with low wages and with little by way of local networks. Their working conditions can often be vulnerable and precarious. Often, both husband and wife travel together. While the husband works on the boat, women are engaged as hired workers in fish

processing. Women's choice of work is further limited since they are forced to stay near the port to wait for their husbands.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly harsh impact on these migrant workers. Some lost their jobs; some left Thailand fearing the pandemic since Thailand suffered the spread of the disease earlier than in Cambodia or Myanmar. Some remained but were left in a precarious situation since restrictions in mobility made it difficult for them to go anywhere. The Thai government issued several stay extension provisions for migrant workers which allowed registered migrant workers to extend their stay. However, new registrations did not take place, and those who missed the registration deadline remained undocumented. Workers who went back to home countries during the initial months of the pandemic wanted to return to Thailand but the pandemic made it even harder for them to cross the border. While both women and men migrant workers faced such difficulties, women migrants tended to be less likely to return back to work because their responsibilities in their home countries had increased with the pandemic. Women-dominated workplaces such as factories also were affected more by the pandemic, hence women lost more jobs.

With the pandemic subsiding, will migrant women and men be able to have a better say and more negotiation power now that the employers have experienced the difficulties with a lack of migrant workers? Will women in fisheries be able to further expand their new markets that they have found during the pandemic? All of these remain to be seen. ■