

Recognizing women's work

Reflections on women, gender concerns and the fisheries from a workshop held in Bangkok as part of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture

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The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in partnership with Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF) organized a workshop titled 'Asia Workshop: IYAFA 2022-Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries' from 5 to 8 May 2022 at Bangkok, Thailand. This was the first of four regional workshops planned by ICSF to mark 2022, proclaimed as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) by the United Nations. The workshop focused on the implementation and monitoring of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), with emphasis on tenure rights, social development, and gender in fisheries. The third day of the workshop was devoted to Women and Gender in Small-Scale Fisheries.

Women contribute a great deal to fisheries activities all over Asia. As Arlene Nietes Satapornvaint noted in her presentation, women make up 18 per cent of the workers in primary production nodes, while in other nodes, women outnumber men by as much as three or four times. It was reported that in Bangladesh, 60 per cent of people in inland fisheries are women. Women play a large part of the pre- and post- fishing activities. They prepare gear and carry out fish vending and processing activities. Women, unlike men, often fish without boats, and using their hands or simple tools, they glean aquatic and marine species that are vital contributions towards household food security.

However, women in fisheries face a number of problems including lack of access to finance, information, technology and training. Women have difficulty securing spaces for processing

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Women participants at Asia workshop. Fishers in general have less access to insurance, but women are excluded more than men since they are not even considered to be fishers and thus not entitled to fisheries-related insurance and other government support

activities – storing, cleaning and drying fish as well as selling fish. They face restrictions in access to transportation, which makes it hard for them to reach markets. Poor women find it difficult to source fish for selling or for processing since they are dependent on men for fish supplies. Declining fish resources and loss of mangrove cover affect women more as they depend on mangrove forests for income and food.

Fatima Majeed from Pakistan stated: ‘There is no longer any space for women’. Her talk demonstrated that due to low levels of water in the Indus delta, fish and crab catches are on the decline, resulting in women losing their livelihood in these areas. Low water levels have also led to drinking water shortages. Further, women who used to make their living making fishing nets have lost out to factory-made nets imported from China or Taiwan.

Jyoti Maher representing National Fishworkers’ Forum, India said that most women fish vendors are forced to sell fish on the roadside and are thus vulnerable to eviction by the government or the police. Salma Sabiha from Bangladesh reported a case in a remote island where fisherwomen collect fish and shrimps at dawn because of obstacles encountered during the day. They have no access to market and face wage discrimination as fish processors, she added. In both India and Bangladesh, it was reported that women in the fisheries sector do not have access to health or sanitation facilities, to reproductive health services or to breast feeding support and spaces. Women fishers suffer occupational health issues such as skin problems and back pain, but these problems are not addressed or paid any attention.

Fishers in general have less access to insurance, but women are excluded more than men since they are not even considered to be fishers and thus not entitled to fisheries-related insurance and other government support. A representative from Cambodia reported that COVID-19 cash support did not reach fishers, especially women fishers, because they lack awareness and access to information. Representatives from Indonesia and India noted that even though there exist insurance policies for fishers, women fishers are not able to access these, since they are not recognized or issued any identification as fishers by the government – in Indonesia, this would be a fisher ID and in India, cooperative membership. To recognize women’s roles and contributions in fisheries, gender disaggregated data is a critical necessity.

Increasing women’s voices in fisheries decision making is also vital.

It is often the case that the unrecognized or underrecognized nature of women’s role in fisheries is not even problematized. Government officers often fail to realize that they are discriminating against women because they do not understand the gendered barriers that women face. They fail to grasp that the gender implications of policies and programs are different for women and men because of gender differences in roles and access to resources and therefore, gender-blind policies/ programs can be unconsciously discriminatory. Government officers need to be trained to recognize the gender-differentiated effects of interventions. A delegate from the Philippines reported a case where token recognition led to unexpected outcomes. In a certain area, pump wells were introduced as part of a solution for water shortage. But because the wells were designed for use by men not women, the project failed, and the wells were soon abandoned. This case demonstrates the importance of including women in project planning.

There was discussion around the question of what exactly it means to ‘recognize’ women in fisheries. Edlyn Rosales of the Philippines pointed out that recognition alone is insufficient. She said, ‘If the recognition is genuine, efforts taken by the government in securing coastal areas and protecting rights for women engaged in their livelihood and families must be visible’. The workshop went on to identify two main ways to ‘recognize’ women in fisheries, namely organizing women and formalizing women’s work.

Organizing women is one of the most effective ways to make women’s needs visible and voices heard. Chandrani Gamage of Sri Lanka reported as an example of a success story, the case of Sri Lanka’s National Women Fishers Federation. Various income generation programs and livelihood assistance have been provided through this Federation. Women were engaged through the Federation to develop a draft National Fisheries Policy. They were involved in health services and education. In another example, Mai Huong of Vietnam reported that in Vietnam, women participate in cooperatives; in her Huong Thanh Commune Fishery and Tourism Service Cooperative, 15 out of 22 cooperative members are women. Having women champion these organizing efforts is an effective way to make women’s needs visible. Chatjaporn Loyplew from Thailand added that women’s groups and fishers’ groups are able

Organizing women and supporting women champions continue to be the most important and effective way to empower women in the fisheries



Thailand participants at the Asia workshop. No matter how much women may want to do more things, it may not be physically possible unless responsibilities are shared at the grassroots level

to dialogue with the government and develop solutions together.

Although in general, organizing women is important, some concerns and cautionary points were also raised. Women's groups and organizations need to be well-linked with other organizations, cooperatives and networks. Collective action is effective because there is strength in numbers. If women's organizations/groups are isolated, they will not be visible. It is important therefore that they join hands with mainstream cooperatives and networks.

It was pointed out, in this context, that there is a risk in working with male-dominated cooperatives. In such cooperatives, women's voices can be sidelined, and they may be further marginalized. Suryani Pacong of Indonesia shared a case of a struggle by a women's group against port development. Women were the ones who initiated the protest. However, when the movement became strong, men took over and the women were marginalized on the grounds that they were making the protest difficult. The probable reason men did not want to include women in the protest was because they did not want to share the compensation amount that would be paid out. In the end,

compensation was awarded to fishers, but as women are not recognized as fishers, they did not receive anything. May Hnin Wai of Myanmar shared that women try to overcome challenges through women's organizations in Myanmar but these are often sabotaged by political interests. The importance of including women should be grasped by both women and men in the community and in organizations.

Organizing women is necessary but women are often unable to participate in such efforts because of the time restrictions they face. Women need to take care of household work before they can turn to group activities. Sadeas Loah from Cambodia shared a case study that showed how women cannot take part in collective action because of household work burdens. Since women are often dependent on men socially and economically, without the husband's approval, most women cannot participate.

Another way to recognize women's work in fisheries is through the formalization of their work. Having better gender disaggregated data is one way to achieve this. Women's contributions to the fisheries is kept informal and invisible as these are often done either

at home or seasonally/part time without the use of gear. It is therefore very important that women's work be included in the statistics. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that while formalization is necessary, it should not become a route for additional tax burdens on the poor.

Apart from including women's work in the statistics, full membership in fisheries cooperatives is another way to formalize women's work in fisheries. Currently cooperatives or fishing groups extend membership only to those who have boats. Women who fish without using boats are not included. Women are often part time fishers, handling household work as well as other income generating work to supplement the often-volatile family income from fishing. The part-time nature of their work is usually the reason for their exclusion from cooperative membership. In Indonesia, the Fisher ID card is mandatory for access to government incentives and support. However, even a woman engaged in fishing might be denied this card if her status in the national ID card is indicated as 'housewife'. For Fisher ID eligibility, she would need to first change her national ID card status to 'fisher'.

Organizing women and formalizing women's work in the Fisheries sector are crucially necessary efforts but more needs to be done to ensure the full recognition of women's role in fisheries. Women play a large role in supporting fisheries through their non-fisheries work. Fisheries organizations would have difficulty in recognizing the need for multiple sources of income of the fisher households. Women have various needs that are different from men since they are often responsible for household financial management. A representative from Cambodia brought up the case of fisherwomen requesting for non-fisheries skills training to enable income diversification. Recognizing women in fisheries thus involves widening the scope of fisheries to consider the livelihood of fishers as a whole. An important part of women's work that is often omitted is their unpaid care work responsibilities. The social protection report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) noted that Covid-19 support often did not cover the needs of women, including childcare and other household care work. Fisheries organizations too tend to ignore women's needs and do not take into consideration women's unpaid care work.

As Sebastian Mathew of ICSF pointed out, the key point is to be clear about the kind

of inclusion needed. The donors might like to see women forming groups. That might not be what women want. Consultation and participation are key for inclusion.

The takeaways from the session may be summarized as follows:

Organizing women and supporting women champions continue to be the most important and effective way to empower women in the fisheries. Dani Setiawan of Indonesia pointed out that community organizing used to be a standard approach to development in the past, but nowadays NGOs and grassroots groups do not have any budget for training and community organization. Investing in community leaders and women champions is important to strengthen the movement as a whole and women in particular.

Women fishers need to be involved in fisheries and other formal organizations, such as organizations in landing sites and in government departments; women should be formally registered as fishers.

Capacity building for women on planning, program design and implementation is important, so that they are able to participate better and articulate their needs and problems effectively in communities and organizations.

Creating linkages and networks between women's groups and mainstream cooperatives, between women and men within the cooperatives, as well as between women fishers and government officers are needed. Women need to be integrated into the system so that they have the information they need and the space to voice their concerns.

Capacity building of government officers are important so that they can identify gender issues. Many times, government officers are not able to see that there is gender discrimination in fisheries.

Gender-responsive fisheries require not only changes in fisheries practices but also changes in the daily practices of the community and households. Responsibilities in the household need to be shared, so that women's time can be freed to take part in organizational activities. As the participants from Thailand noted 'No matter how much women may want to do more things, it may not be physically possible unless responsibilities are shared at the grassroots level'.

More researchers on gender and fisheries are needed on the ground. We need to gather evidence and facilitate dialogue across genders, across organizations, and with government and other stakeholders. ❏