

# Building solidarities

**A panel discussion during the 8th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries on women's shared experiences in the fisheries highlighted key issues facing women in the sector today**

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The 8th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF 8) was organized from 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2022 by the Society of Fisheries Technologists (SOFTI) and the ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (ICAR-CIFT) in the city of Kochi in the southern state of Kerala in India.

In the morning of the third day of the symposium, Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, N. Venugopalan, Programme Manager, International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) moderated a panel discussion titled 'Women in Fisheries: Shared Experiences'.

The session began with the screening of a documentary, *Shescapes: Women in Small-scale Fisheries* compiled by ICSF (<https://www.icsf.net/resources/shescapes-women-in-small-scale-fisheries/>) on the roles and experiences of women in fisheries in countries around the world. The film clearly illustrated that across

the globe, despite differences in society, culture, politics and economics, women's involvement in the fisheries follows a similar arc.

Following the screening, a panel discussion took place, chaired by N. Venugopalan. The panellists were Ms. Kyoko Kusakabe, Kyoko of Gender and Development Studies, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand; Ms. Carmen Pedroza-Gutiérrez, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico; Ms. Cecile Brugere, Independent Consultant, Aquaculture/Fisheries Economics, Gender and Sustainable Development, Soulfish Research & Consultancy, York, United Kingdom; Ms. Natalie Makhoul, Gender and Human Rights Specialist, Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme, Pacific Community, SPC, Fiji; Ms. Neha W. Qureshi, Senior Scientist, FEES Division, ICAR-CIFE, Mumbai, India and Ms. Tara Nair, Director (Research), Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions, Bengaluru, India.



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The discussion focussed on the following questions:

1. Does the discourse on women in fisheries explicitly recognize women's human rights, labour rights (including occupational safety and health), environmental rights (participation in resource management, climate change coping mechanisms, differential impact of disasters on women), and social impacts (including the role played by the community in ownership rights in near shore fisheries)?

2. Are women organized better now? Are organizations more attentive at the national and international levels to gender and women's issues?

3. What are the effects of increasing mobility and participation in multiple activities by women as fishers, traders, wage labourers in the processing industry; as farmers in aqua farms; as migrant workers; and as caregivers, among others?

4. What are the major changes in coping mechanisms for women?

5. What is the legislative and policy support for women at the national and international level? Is there data available about women's employment and participation in fisheries?

6. Empowerment and agency of women is important for community development. What is the nature of progress made in this regard? What is the nature of resistance to these changes?

Natalie Makhoul, representing the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership programme, in her opening remarks stated that her work centred around gender and human rights, was undergirded by a human rights-based approach. The attempt, she said, is to understand how Fisheries Acts as well as coastal fisheries- and aquaculture-related policies and legislation have included the issues of gender and human rights. The research on this is helping to shift the discourse on human rights into the gender space and to look at gender equality from a human rights lens. She stated that there is substantial progress to be made in the quest to unite gender and human rights and they should not be regarded as separate concepts. She added that international debates around the SSF Guidelines have been helpful in carrying forward the debate.

The next speaker, Kyoko Kusakabe, in her opening remarks raised four points in relation to gender and fisheries. The first, she stated, is that women are excluded from the definition of fisheries.

The second point she made was that while undertaking gender analysis of work in the fisheries, we need to include not only post-harvest but also household work and

non-fishing activities. Women often have to undertake non-fishing activities such as being hired out as manual labour or doing factory work to supplement the volatile nature of fisheries income. Women's work in fisheries, for instance, fish processing, could be done in factories or at home. Factory work is regulated by labour laws, while home based work in fisheries is often a community activity and allows greater flexibility in division of labour, in turn allowing the fishers to adjust to risks better. She pointed out that for instance, in Thailand, in households where men and women are not restricted to only fishing, but are flexible, families are better able to adjust to risks and shocks, which is why it is very important that the division of labour in the house be taken into consideration.

Kyoko Kusakabe's third point was about the large and persistent gender wage gap in the sector, which is usually defended on the grounds that women's work is different from that of men, who do the hard work. This explanation, Kyoko Kusakabe pointed out, implicitly ignores women's skills. Their work is seen as merely extension of household work and is therefore low paid. There has to be a demand for Minimum Wage, and improved working conditions in the post-harvest work of women in fisheries. Further, it is important to both recognise women's skills and reskill them, training them to be able to stay on in the sector more securely.

Her final point was about women's leadership and its linkage with migration. In communities in South-east Asia, returning migrant women have much greater levels of knowledge, confidence, and articulation, and consequently, the potential to be good women leaders at work and in the community.

The next speaker, Cecile Brugere, chose to focus on the questions on women's rights and organisation. She began by mentioning that there is a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst, who led the suffragette movement in the second half of the 1800s, in the city centre in Manchester. The last time she saw that statue, said Cecile Brugere, someone had placed in its hand a leaflet supporting the women of Iran in their current struggle. Nearly a hundred and fifty years separated the suffragette movement in the UK and the protests in Iran; however, she pointed out, even today civil disobedience is needed in many parts of the world for women to claim their basic rights and freedoms. Connecting the dots, she asked if civil disobedience might be required in the fisheries and aquaculture sector today for women's rights to be respected. Women's rights are hardly fulfilled in these sectors – the right to decent work is rarely available whether among fish vendors of India; on the factory floors in processing factories in Chile; or in seaweed plots in Zanzibar. Advances in women's

empowerment are mostly at an individual personal level. Human rights are however much larger than the rights of individuals alone.

According to Cecile Brugere, another factor contributing to the lack of respect of human and women's rights, in particular, in fisheries and aquaculture, is systemic and structural bias against the fulfilment of women's rights, which makes it difficult to change stereotypes and false constructs about women. To change this state of affairs, equality and equity between men and women need to be mainstreamed in policies, in tenures, and in modes of access to resources. Greater organisation of women, greater voice, agency, and the recognition of women as agents of change can also help.

Elaborating on the question of women organizing for change, Cecile Brugere stated that organisations can take various forms and shapes. They can be formal or informal, depending on the purpose and the shared objective of the members. They can range from unions to self-help groups. She shared inspiring examples of women organizing in Africa, where there are strong local-level, professional organisations of fishers that are well connected with powerful regional organisations representing the interests

of Small-scale fishers and women, which, in turn, are linked to national-level organisations. Such organisations, for example the Confédération Africaine des Organisations de Pêche (CAOPA) in West Africa, CAOPA in West Africa, and ICSF at the global level, were very influential in the drafting of the SSF Guidelines, as a result of which, the SSF Guidelines are very strong on gender equality and equity issues. She pointed out that regional organisations like Fishnet, the African women fish processors and traders' network, are gradually becoming more and more influential. They have established chapters in several countries. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Women Fishworkers association (TWOFA), established in 2019, recently gained recognition at the policy level with the government. These, said Cecile Brugere, represent the power of organisations but organisations are also not a panacea. Group dynamics are difficult and creating those units at ground level can be tricky. She mentioned the new FAO guide on mapping women's organisations which she felt was an excellent practical tool to better understand how networks of organisations work, what their dynamics are, and how they can influence power.

The next speaker, Neha Qureshi, in her opening remarks focused on common property resources. She pointed out that in India, there is a huge potential for water resources, across the aqua climatic zones – an inland sector, a marine sector, and a huge coastline. However, issues of common property resources have not been adequately analysed from a gender perspective. There are multi-institutional and multi-community conflicts around water resources, and fisherwomen are often the worst hit in these conflicts.

Neha Qureshi also brought up the example of Maharashtra, where in areas like Uran, Thane and Raigad, there are inter-sectional conflicts between tribal women and traditional fishermen. Tribal women face several access restrictions since they are not considered traditional fishers. This means that they have to detour and travel longer distances to access markets and sell their fish, which is their only source of livelihood. Further, in the case of lakes, said Neha Qureshi who hails from the Kashmir, the lake-rich, northernmost state of India, and has worked on issues related to the Himalayan lakes, there are multiple and diverse economic interests: fishers, vegetable growers, tourism and many others, each with a vested interest in a particular water body or set of water bodies. In this competition for resource access, fishers, primarily women fishers, get affected.

Neha Qureshi also brought up the need to formalize customary rights. She cited the example of women fish vendors in coastal

communities, whose right to vend fish in streets and other public spaces, constitutes a grey area of legality, making them vulnerable to exploitation by policemen and others in the community. She pointed out that there have been hardly any concerted efforts to formalize the customary rights of fishers and that it should be possible to use Geographical Information Systems (GIS)-based technologies to map fishing hamlets and coastal processing sites traditionally used by women in order to formalize the customary rights of fishing communities. Neha Qureshi noted, in this context, that formalizing customary rights in the case of the inland fisheries sector represents a challenge, due to the diversity and heterogeneity of communities and use patterns. However, she concluded by pointing out that many inland fisheries were organized into cooperatives, and that the Department of Fisheries could play an important role by strengthening these cooperatives and creating awareness to enable the empowerment of women fishers.

The next speaker, Tara Nair, whose work is focused on issues of migration and labour, started by pointing out the need to locate enquiries around gender within the larger development discourse, whether in India or elsewhere in the world. The emerging global debate is concerned with what exactly development means for those engaged primary activities like fisheries or farming. There are derived regional debates that look at local development trajectories and local moral codes and schemes. All these, said

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The film, Shescapes: Women in Small-scale Fisheries is available at: <https://www.icsf.net/resources/unseen-faces-unheard-voices-women-and-aquaculture-purba-medinipur-west-bengal/> The film clearly illustrated that across the globe, despite differences in society, culture, politics and economics, women's involvement in the fisheries follows a similar arc

Tara Nair, impact the position of women. She pointed out that because we are focused on issues of women within the sector, in particular, on gender discrimination within the sector, our approach tends to become sectoral. However, it is important that these issues be examined within the larger national and global perspective. The State, said Tara Nair, associates development with modernization, which means mechanised and export-oriented fisheries and not artisanal and Small-scale fisheries. That creates the locus of large sets of vulnerabilities. We need to examine, she said, the whole question of blue revolution or port-led industrialisation and infrastructure development, and as feminist scholars, to develop a larger critique.

The second issue that Tara Nair talked about concerned the informal nature of production processes – an area where gross neglect of labour laws occurs. ‘Whether fisheries or the garments sector in Bangladesh, the story is not going to be very different,’ said Tara Nair, adding that this suggested the possibility of alliances of women workers across sectors. She also pointed out the need to historically locate women’s struggles in a time trajectory. The eighties, she said, were focused on trying to get women’s rights recognised through street protests and civil rights movements. The nineties involved organising, mobilizing, and trying out various models of organization: cooperatives; self-help groups; mutually aided cooperatives. The 2000s witnessed the onslaught of a new development paradigm. Such dynamics demand that old models and solutions be modified and redefined. Tara Nair talked about the contradictions building up within cooperatives in India, which worked quite well in an earlier time but are facing the growing pressure of commercialization today.

Tara Nair concluded by pointing out that change is not one directional. Young women are increasingly making inroads into male-dominated business domains because they are more educated, more aware, and more business- and technology-savvy today. The way forward is to combine new capabilities with existing challenges and create newer strategies, alliances, and solidarities.

The last speaker, Carmen Pedroza, agreed with many of the points raised by previous panellists. She pointed out that one of the problems is that women in fisheries and many other economic activities are regarded as the newcomers. ‘This insight comes from my work with fishing communities,’ said Carmen Pedroza, ‘The question we are asked is what are we women doing in these males dominated activities?’

She pointed out that since Small-scale fisheries in many parts of the world are in the

informal sector, women are impacted in various ways by informality and poverty. So, the lens required to examine these issues is not only one of gender and power but also of development and economic structure.

Many problems that women have, said Carmen Pedroza, are linked to access to scarce resources, markets, and prices. These problems are not static. In Mexico, she pointed out, women in sea cucumber fishery started with abundant resources, till it became a high value species, and the nature of the problem changed. With high incomes came competition from men and also resource scarcity because the sea cucumber fishery was overexploited. Given the rapidly changing scenario, said Carmen Pedroza, women have to invent different coping strategies to reorganise the fishery and deal with the shift from abundance to scarcity because, at the end of the day, they are the ones who have to feed the family.

Drawing attention to the problems of inland fisheries, Carmen Pedroza, pointed out that most of the research and attention is focused on discussing the marine fisheries sector. However, women in inland fisheries are worse off because they deal with lower value species; therefore, they earn lower incomes, have greater levels of poverty, and poor access to water, to resources, and to market structures. The informality and associated problems are even worse in inland fisheries than in marine fisheries, she concluded.

After the panellists made their opening remarks, questions were invited from the audience.

The first question was about whether at some future date, women might overcome social taboos to own boats and engage in fishing.

Natalie Makhoul responded by stating that while binary gender stereotypes such as ‘Men fish and women are in post-harvest,’ prevail, the GAF 8 symposium itself demonstrated that this is not always the case. She pointed out a case of a woman participant from the Cook Islands who engages in spear fishing – a type of fishing that is male dominated and tabooed for women in the cultural context in Polynesia. Gender, said Natalie Makhoul, is a social construct. It is a concept that is being challenged daily and more so due to out-migration. Demographic changes have put women into positions especially in the rural areas where they have to go out on boats, which was not always the case, and sometimes considered culturally inappropriate.

Kyoko Kusakabe added that in Thailand, there are no taboos regarding women owning boats – women do own boats and often hire people to run them. Regarding the gender division of labour, she pointed out that the solution did not lie in swapping roles, that is, in women starting to fish and men doing fish

processing: 'What we should really be looking at is that if fishing is a dangerous occupation, we should improve the safety. Similarly, in processing if the wages are so low, how can we improve wages? Then more men would also be interested to join, and women would also enjoy better status.'

The next question was about alternative forms of organizing for women's empowerment and social change.

Termining this 'an unfinished agenda', Tara Nair pointed out that the experience of cooperatives in India shows that it is not enough to create only a structure or a form; what is needed is continuing institutional support and enabling conditions in terms of loans, capital, and other resources so that the structure can develop and become viable.

Another question was about the role of culture and tradition: If gender barriers are rooted in culture and tradition, what alternatives are possible? In response, several reflections and suggestions were offered including the need for women in fisheries to move from informalisation to formalisation and the need for education as well as capacity and leadership skills building.

N. Venugopalan concluded the session by thanking the panellists and audience. He thanked the staff of ICAR-CIFT for their support, and also thanked certain individuals, particularly Jain and Parimal, for shooting the proceedings and Vibhav for excellent sound support. He finally thanked the organizers of GAF8 for organizing the symposium and making the panel discussion possible. ❏