

Contributing significantly

Women make major contributions to the fisheries sector in China but more needs to be done to promote equal rights in fisheries and accelerate women's development

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China has the world's largest fisheries sector. The sector contributes to poverty alleviation, food security and economic growth, and generates employment and livelihood. Fish is also a significant source of animal protein for Chinese people.

Though women form an important part of the fisheries workforce and participate in almost all activities, including aquaculture, fish sorting, handling and processing, distribution and marketing, their contributions are often overlooked and poorly documented. In general, women play a larger role in aquaculture than in capture fisheries.

The gross output value of Chinese fisheries increased from US\$18.93 billion in 1994 to US\$52.57 billion in 2004, largely due to the rapid development of aquaculture. In 2000, China had a population of approximately 1.3 billion people,

cent female. These proportions differ from that of the aggregate rural work force—51.7 per cent male and 48.3 per cent female.

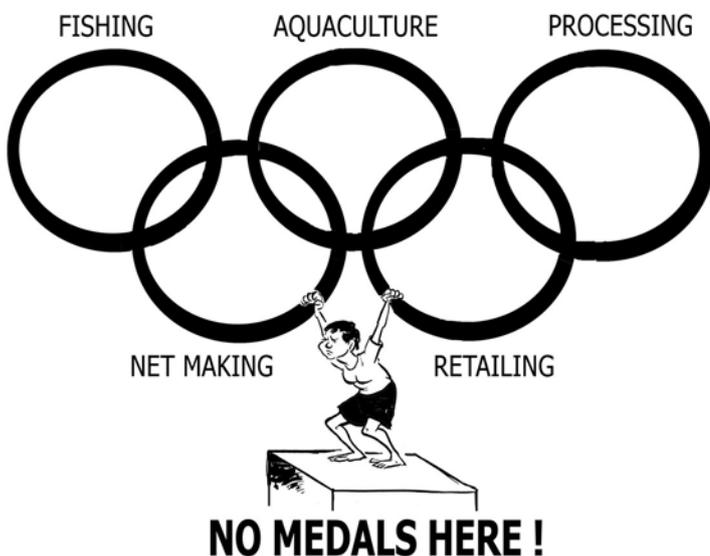
In national fisheries institutions, female staff and workers represent only about 23 per cent of the total 100,865 employees. The share of women is highest (38.14 per cent) in fisheries and aquaculture science education and research institutions, and lowest in fishing port management (11 per cent), in fishing vessel inspection services (14.1 per cent) and in fishery administrative agencies (15.35 per cent).

In small-scale fisheries, women are involved in all stages of production, including in fish processing, preservation and marketing. Women constitute a higher proportion of the labour force in fish processing and distribution, in traditional processing activities for preparing dried, salted or smoked fish, and in factories for fish canning or prawn processing. Women in the canning and processing factories mainly work as operators in processing lines, and, in shrimp processing plants, women's work is mainly to peel, sort and clean the shrimp. In one fish processing company in Shanghai that we studied, raw material such as shrimp, squid, baked eel and fish was obtained from fishing boats or fish farms in fresh or frozen form, and then further processed by 300 employees. Of these, women accounted for 80 per cent of the 30 management staff, and 90 per cent of the factory floor workers.

Many women are involved in the retail marketing of aquatic products through their family units. For example, at the large food market in Shengsi, Zhejiang province (east and central China), there are 791 food stalls. Of the 388 that sell aquatic products, 372 are managed by women. Most of the stalls are run by husband-and-wife teams, with the wives being primarily responsible for retail sales.

Women involved in small-scale fisheries are usually wives or daughters of fishers. In many cases, they work to supplement the family income, and, in some cases, they may not have any wage if it is a home-based family business. They help their husbands sell the catch, accompany their husbands out to sea to fish, mend nets and process the fish caught.

Women play an important role in aquaculture, being actively involved in every aspect of production, from breeding fish fry



of which 48.48 per cent were women. About 72.5 per cent of the population is rural and 104 million people, predominately women, are illiterate or semi-literate. In 2004, employment in the fisheries sector was estimated at 12.9 million people—approximately two per cent of the country's labour force—consisting of 7.1 million professional fishers and aquaculturists, and 5.8 million part-time workers. The 2000 general census reported that 74.5 per cent of the fisheries labour force was male and 25.5 per

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and feeding the fish to managing the pond. In labour-intensive farms there are many skilled female workers providing manual labour. Women and the elderly are the main workers carrying out fish breeding as a family activity on the side. Rural women manage and manure fish ponds, feed fish, and harvest and market the products while men do agricultural or other part-time jobs.

Women comprise a much smaller proportion of the declining capture fisheries labour force. To protect marine fishery resources, maintain economically sustainable fisheries and promote social stability in coastal regions, Chinese fisheries authorities and local coastal governments have restructured the fisheries and are reducing the population of fishers by transferring them into other sectors of the economy. Most local young men do not become fishers nowadays. Therefore, the overall number of fishers, both men and women, has declined and the existing labour force is aging.

Our surveys show that many of the labourers in coastal fishing villages in Shanghai are migrants from other parts of China and receive only about US\$6.56 per day. The profile of fishing vessel workers has also changed. Old women do not work onboard fishing vessels any more; however, about 30 per cent of the crew comprises middle-aged women. Since the 1980s, women no longer work on fishing vessels in some ports, such as in Yantai, Shandong Province. Most young girls seek jobs outside the fishing ports and villages. Few want to live in their fishing villages and those who stay usually engage in domestic work such as looking after the household, child care and repairing fishing nets.

Promoting leisure and recreational fisheries is part of the new strategy for fishery reconstruction in China. This includes creating tourism zones around coastal fishing villages, for tourists to fish, enjoy the scenery and learn about local customs and culture. Women have more opportunities for employment in such forms of tourism; they act as tourist guides, prepare and cook seafood and give performances, presenting folk songs or dances related to fishing life. Thus, women's social roles are changing with the development of the leisure fishing industry.

They are taking on multiple roles in society and are gaining more independence, economically and in family decision-making.

China has adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Chinese Constitution grants equal status to all citizens. The Government protects women's rights and benefits, guarantees equal pay for equal work, and protects the health and safety of women at the workplace. Unsuitable work cannot be assigned to women, and women are provided special protection during the menstrual period, pregnancy, obstetrical and nursing period. The Chinese Government has also undertaken measures to enhance women's labour market competitiveness.

To further improve the status of women in Chinese fisheries, we propose that employment platforms be built and that women's employment as well as income be increased. We recommend that the government run capacity-building training courses on science, technology and law for fisherwomen; support women's entrepreneurship and intensify campaigns to strengthen women's self-protection and safety awareness.

Women's development is not being addressed in an integrated manner in China's efforts to build a more prosperous society. More research and monitoring is needed to improve the basis for development. At present, research on women and gender issues is rare and development progress is reported under such headings as family and per capita statistics. In the fisheries sector, little data is available on the condition of women. Data collection needs to be better designed to capture gender differences in fisheries participation in order to help promote equal rights in fisheries and to accelerate women's development.

Women are active in all aspects of fisheries in China. However, the shackles of traditional ideals, low educational levels and the lack of empowering initiatives constrain their further development. Policy makers in fisheries should specifically target women's development, right at the level of the fishing villages, so that comprehensive development of the sector takes place and a harmonious society may be built. ❖