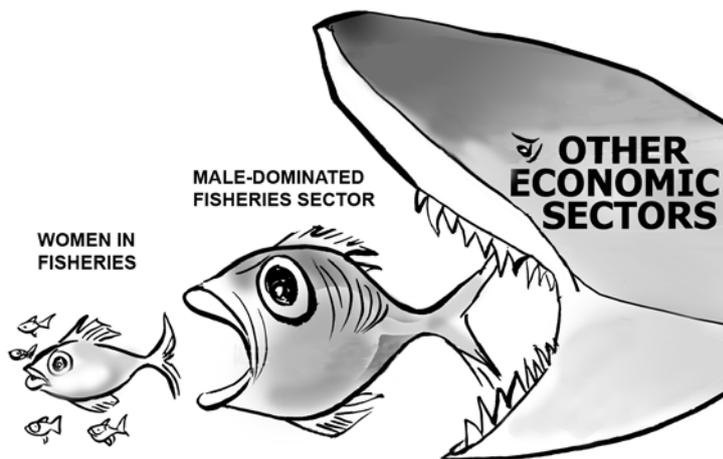


# Meeting the challenge

This article addresses how action and research can be used to make fisheries policies more gender-sensitive and what challenges are involved

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Thousands of seasonal fish products are produced by millions of fishworkers, many of them women. Fish trade is booming; fish farming is growing fast; fish prices were escalating well before other food prices rose; fish sustainability is a hot topic; and fuel prices threaten fishing profits. Power and authority is concentrated in the larger companies, the owners of larger fleets and the well-organized fishing countries. It has always been apparently held by men. Even so, fisheries power can be eclipsed by that of other sectors and national policies, such as for international trade, water and coastal tourism.



Governments and communities have to 'catch up' on fisheries policy development, and women's roles and contributions are often left behind, undervalued and unrecognized. Fisheries policies and industry programmes tend to address fish production, exports and fuel prices. Yet, a broader look at gender-differentiated roles and concerns along the whole fish supply chain shows a clearer view of fisheries problems and intervention points. For example, in the Republic of Palau, a mainstream picture identifies fisheries with men and focuses on offshore tuna resources, the live reef fish trade and tourist game fishing. It ignores women's inshore and lagoon fishing and increasing participation on boats, the need

for better fish market facilities, the importance to all Palauans of inshore fishery resources and marine conservation and of finding better domestic benefits from tuna. With a broader, gender-inclusive view, we can then better focus attention on where action is required. And women's contributions clearly emerge.

National governments have been slow to create opportunities, rights and responsibilities that are shared more fairly throughout the chain because they work in bureaucratic and compartmentalized ways. Therefore, through advocacy and the insights they produce, action groups and researchers must stimulate attention to women in fish supply chains.

Only in the last two decades has a small movement begun to document and understand women's contributions and to get these heard in policy making. This movement, of which the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), *Yemaya* and the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS)/WorldFish Center symposia are important parts, is still in its infancy.

Through action and research, women in fisheries are gaining policy attention, but so far the gains have been small. Development agencies are focusing on gender opportunities in the fisheries, and countries, charities and researchers are responding with proposals. National and international fisheries programmes are paying more attention to women. For example, in India, women's programmes for mussel culture have been successfully developed by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). The Mekong River Commission's Network on Gender and Fisheries is a full member of the policy development committee, the Technical Advisory Body for the Lower Mekong Basin countries. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) will cover the role of women in the October 2008 Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries.

I see three obstacles to greater policy focus on women in fisheries. First, larger economic and more male-dominated interests control much of fisheries, providing little space for secondary interests, including those of women, crew and other service workers. Second, women's fisheries contributions are diverse, dynamic and not well known. Third, the fisheries sector is eclipsed by other economic sectors, and women are thus doubly overshadowed.

To overcome the power obstacle, activists can aid women by drawing public and political attention to women's real and potential contributions. Activists should aim to get women's needs into fisheries and related policies. This will mean shifting the focus to the whole supply chain.

To address the knowledge obstacle, we have to build the knowledge base on women in fisheries. In Kochi, India, on 22 November 2007, 21 gender experts concluded that social justice arguments have additional policy traction if supported by a deeper understanding and quantification of women's contributions. Studies are needed on women's unpaid and paid labour in fisheries and on whether women have equal opportunities for jobs and promotion throughout the sector, including as researchers.

Fisheries and aquaculture education and vocational training policy also need to incorporate gender-sensitivity. University teachers and extensionists need to share and have access to gender and fisheries curricula, syllabi and case studies. Several projects are

now addressing this need. The ICSF Women in Fisheries Bibliography (<http://wif.icsf.net/icsf2006/jspFiles/wif/bibliography/biblioHome.jsp>) provides useful pointers to research and policy reports.

Research and action agencies need to model their own principles and remove barriers to women's entry. Women may be restricted from professional education and training in fisheries and aquaculture research and extension due to lack of basic facilities, such as student dormitories. At the Assam Agricultural University, India, a girls' hostel was built for the Bachelor of Fisheries Science course. In Bangladesh, CARE developed affirmative action policies for its own staff to better reach rural women.

To remove the obstacle of being doubly overshadowed, women in the fisheries sector should be publicly involved in decision-making committees and management bodies. This can broaden the sector's profile, widen the talent pool and give fisheries a sounder position from which to engage with other sectors. ❏

**“Getting women's needs into fisheries and related policies will mean shifting the focus to the whole supply chain.”**