

From the margins to the mainstream

The Asian Fisheries Society has travelled a long way in making gender and fisheries a priority concern. Meryl Williams reflects on the journey made so far

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In this article, I would like to reflect on the journey so far that the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS), the pre-eminent and mainstream fisheries and aquaculture professional society in Asia-Pacific, has taken towards making gender in fisheries and aquaculture, with all its angles and complexities, a mainstream topic on its programmes.

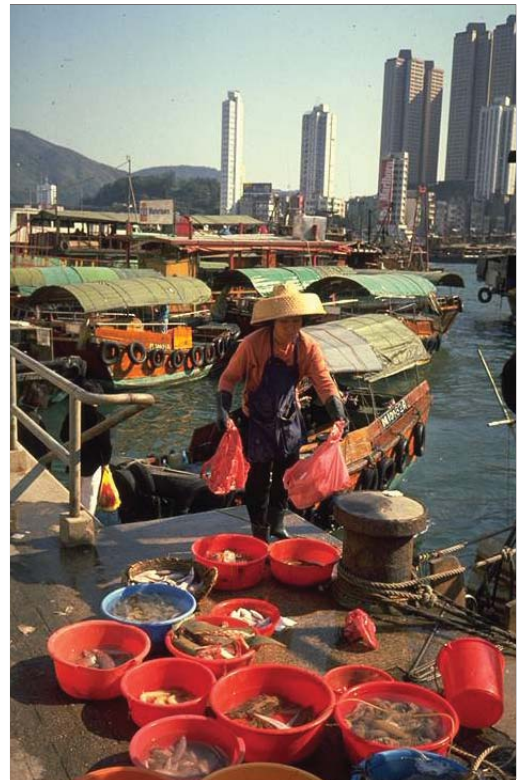
The AFS was created in 1984. Within two years it established a major and comprehensive triennial forum, the Asian Fisheries Forum, now called the Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum (see www.9afaf.org). Along with the Forum, the interests and themes of the AFS have included several national chapters (India, Japan, and Taiwan); specialist networks, for example, fish health and social science; thematic conferences, for example, cage culture in Asia; and a scientific journal, *Asian Fisheries Science*.

In 1995, a photo competition, organized by PADEK of Cambodia, graphically highlighted the role of women in fisheries. Following this, in 1998, women in fisheries became a new programme theme, introduced by the Thailand Department of Fisheries through an International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries, and treated with seriousness by the leaders of the AFS. Indeed, in his welcome remarks, the Director General pointed out that one-third of his staff consisted of women. The papers presented were stimulating, many descriptive but some analytical as well. One of the more memorable aspects of this event was the reaction from the male attendees at the Forum. The most common question the organizers, male and female, received, was "can men attend?" Social science topics were not new to the AFS but somehow this topic seemed different. The implication was that this was not a totally serious issue and would only be of interest to women. I am pleased to point out that the idea of the symposium was actually the initiative of a man, Dr M.C. Nandeessa, who then was working on aquaculture development in Cambodia and had, previously, in 1994, organized a Cambodia Women in Fisheries Conference and in 1996 an Indochina Women in Fisheries Conference. I am also pleased to

report that many men as well as women attended the 1998 Symposium and took an active part in the discussions.

Undeterred, even emboldened, we went global, with the 2001 Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries. The papers, largely contributed rather than invited, were still predominantly descriptive, but slowly, more research and analysis was entering the discourse. We were and still are trying to find our feet in terms of a firm logical base. Some contributors were driven by feminist and human welfare considerations; others by theme-based research such as small-scale aquaculture, or fish trade and women. Women's development, fisheries and aquaculture development, regional and national comparisons were all addressed. One important result was that a paper by Mary Huang was one of the first in the world to raise the issue, later confirmed in more detailed studies, that HIV/AIDS was an unfortunately prominent disease in many fishing communities. This dimension had not been picked up by even countries taking AIDS action seriously, but it now is.

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Chinese fisherwoman at a harbour. Women in fisheries became a programme theme of the AFS in 1998

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Our next Symposium—the 2004 First Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries—attempted to make the transition from ‘women in fisheries’ to ‘gender and fisheries’. We also attempted to attract a greater research focus by going beyond the more descriptive work. Women in seafood processing became more prominent as the whole fish supply was taken more into account. Thoughtful papers on women’s economic contributions, the gender dimensions of fisheries management, and power and empowerment aspects of aquaculture development were explored.

The 2007 Second Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries continued many of these themes, with a strong emphasis on reaching women through microfinance, self-help groups and development projects. The globalization and marketization of fisheries received attention, as did the lack of access of many women to training to access new aquaculture technologies.

Throughout this more than a decade, the fisheries and aquaculture sector had made little progress globally in addressing gender issues, despite the burgeoning importance of dynamic, high investment supply chains to provide fish to markets across international boundaries. FAO, especially in Africa, had started to codify good practice on gender in fisheries, but the mainstream fisheries instruments, such as the FAO Committee on Fisheries paid no attention to the topic. Slowly, this may be changing however, if the 2010 Global Conference on Aquaculture (Phuket, September 2010) is any barometer. This decadal event did have an Expert Panel

partly addressing gender issues (Expert Panel VI.3 on Human Capacity Development and Gender Issues) and its report was well received at the Global Conference.

The Third Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries at the April 2011 Ninth Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum promises to be a well-attended and lively two-day event. It will break new ground in terms of breadth and depth of papers, which will be reflected in the proceedings expected later in the year. In addition, FAO will be holding a focused invitation-only consultation to brainstorm future priorities on gender in aquaculture and fisheries. We remain quietly confident that, along with the new small-scale fisheries declaration, the United Nation’s UN Women organization, and the ICSF’s Recasting the Net initiative, we may be seeing a groundswell of support for gender and fisheries entering the mainstream of fisheries.

The AFS’s interests in gender are broadly to help the development of the sector through ensuring equality of access to men and women in professional and industry terms, and in giving the sector access to the broadest and best expertise. Individual Society members and supporters have more activist agendas which are not precluded from the broader interests of the Society. Although we may sometimes think that AFS has progressed only slowly, though surely, on gender and fisheries, I note that other mainstream professional societies in fisheries and aquaculture have made almost no progress, with the possible exception of the World Aquaculture Society. ❏