

Women or gender: What's the difference?

This article analyzes the implications of the shift in focus from women to gender in the 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries and the FAO Special Workshop

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Reflecting on the recently concluded 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3) (see article above), what perhaps was most significant about the symposium was the analytical shift repeatedly being made from 'women in fisheries' to 'gender in fisheries'.

A large number of presentations described the sexual and inter-generational division of labour within fishing communities. Often, however, these presentations were non-analytical. Many of the speakers are associated with past work related to women in fisheries. Why don't they any longer talk of 'women in fisheries' but refer instead to 'gender in fisheries'? Although none of the participants addressed this important change, it can probably be explained by the demand of international institutions financing development projects to include not just women but all groups in development programmes. A comment by a participant referring to the FAO-Spain Regional Fisheries Livelihood Programme (RFLP) for South and Southeast Asia, is illuminating: "In fisheries communities, men are also poor and cannot be neglected by development projects".

When we asked symposium participants with whom they actually work within communities, they all responded: "the women".

How may this response be interpreted? Clearly, women constitute the main group requiring support to improve their rights and conditions. Women's empowerment, in that case, is the key element for community development as well as for the improvement of livelihoods. It would appear that while development agencies would like to broaden their scope by bringing every section (men, the aged, the young and so on) under the term 'gender', they still consider women as the main vector of change within the fisheries sector, the family and the community.

A number of speakers, however, did focus on women's issues, pointing out the role played by women in fisheries and aquaculture. According to them, women constitute the primary target group because they face discrimination in employment and because their work lacks recognition. Case studies from several countries highlighted women's entrepreneurial capacities and their important contribution to the fisheries. The speakers were of the view that for women's equality in fisheries, policies must pay attention to women's issues in the sector. A gender analysis framework, based on feminist theory, is necessary for women's empowerment and must guide policymakers.

There were thus two groups in the symposium: one consisting of those working on 'women's issues', and the other of those working on 'gender issues' and using the term 'gender' to refer not just to women but also to men and other sections of society. While the first group had at least some researchers who used feminist theory, the second group consisted largely of researchers guided by theories and practices popularized by development agencies. The two groups failed to arrive at a consensus, partly because of the lack of time and partly because many could not grasp the theoretical and political implications of this difference.

Following GAF3, a special workshop on gender issues in fisheries was organized by the FAO. The objective of this workshop was to discuss with a group of key experts the various ways in which the gender dimension in aquaculture and fisheries could be included in FAO's work. Attention to gender is a recent development within the FAO, the outcome of decades of international lobbying and of the growing demand of civil society representatives for the integration of gender into FAO's policies, as expressed in the World

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Conference on Small-scale Fisheries, held in Bangkok in October 2008.

Prior to GAF3, as part of the preparatory work for the workshop, participants were asked to submit between three to five critical issues concerning gender in aquaculture and fisheries. These were collated and presented during the symposium. Next, during the workshop, experts were divided into two groups, each mandated to brainstorm on a few key questions. Thereafter, three action points and ideas on integrating gender issues in the FAO fisheries policy were solicited from each participant. Finally, all the suggestions were pooled together for discussion, leading to the emergence of five major themes: action, policy, research/data, training and advocacy.

The FAO workshop also reflected a difference in points of view between those

who prioritized women's issues and those who favoured a broad-based definition of gender. The former group advocated the use of the word 'women' in the workshop statements, a suggestion that was not carried through because it was considered to contradict the United Nations definition of gender.

It is advisable for individuals, researchers and organizations working on issues of women in fisheries to be vigilant and to immediately critique the draft statement when it is published. Women's rights require specific attention. The differences between analyses and proposals based on feminist theory and theories used and propagated by international development institutions should be brought to light and discussed in every academic and political event where the issue of women in fisheries is analyzed. ❏

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