

Gender equity and lived experiences

A co-founder of ICSF addresses the issue of gender equity and social justice at a trans-disciplinary workshop

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On April 1st I opened my email to find a request from Too Big to Ignore, the global network on small-scale fisheries, asking if I would share my reflections on the question of Gender Equity and Social Justice at a workshop on trans-disciplinarity, which took place in April 2021. I replied to say that since the request was made on All-Fools Day, I would readily agree. The nature of my instantaneous response might perhaps have raised a doubt in the minds of the organisers on whether an elderly male from a tropical-majority country was indeed the right choice. So, if you find what I have to say on the topic disconcerting, or more likely, lacking in any disciplinary academic rigour, remember, don't send emails on April 1st! Now that I have taken anticipatory bail, I feel more relaxed to proceed.

As I set out to put down my thoughts on this topic of Gender Equity and Social Justice assigned to me by the organisers, I was confronted with the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report which downgraded India to a rather unenviable position among the nations of the world and even among our small neighbours in South Asia. The abysmal performance of India highlights our collective failure in ensuring gender parity across different realms as economic opportunity, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment. I have consistently highlighted that even in states of India which are touted to be models of human development, and boast greater gender parity in some of the above-mentioned realms – Kerala State is the classic example -- the situation in fishing communities calls for far greater introspection as to the real causes for gender inequality. (See my 1995 Paper on Kerala Model and Outliers)

I say this because I have worked closely with artisanal fishing communities and know first-hand the great potentials which they have to *innately* achieve gender equity. However, that does not seem to happen in reality – perhaps for a variety of historical, socio-religious, cultural and political reasons that seriously override and trump what is possible in the '*simple lived experience*'. In the early 1970s, following business management studies and an unsatisfying three-month stint in the corporate sector, my first real professional engagement was in a small fishing village in Kerala. I lived there

for four years helping the fishing community to organise their fishery cooperative and also making efforts to extend the work to other villages. As a middle-class, city-bred and urban-educated person, raised far away from the sea, this shift to a poor rural setting near the sea, was a major change in my life. I undertook a lived experience with a trans-disciplinary team of three others – an Italian woman public health nurse, an urban-educated Indian woman professional community organiser and a rural-educated Indian male professional social worker from the local fishing community. Being placed with a responsibility to facilitate programmes which would result in improving the economic circumstances of the whole village community, I observed keenly the actions and involvements of men and women, in what I called various, "fish chains". The hallmark of the activities across these chains was that they were *highly interdependent, brisk, and tightly organised in space and time*. This is a necessary condition, mainly due to the high perishability of fish, and also the costs associated with any measures intended to extend its shelf-life, giving urgency to the need to move it to the realm of consumption as soon as possible. This is quite unlike activities along the value chain of other food products.

Men usually only labour at sea. There may be few who involve in fish marketing. But there are many who, at a later stage in their lives, give up fishing and labour on the beach/port. So usually, men's occupational interactions are very much at sea and their social involvements restricted largely around their coastal village spaces. Once men land the fish, their attention and responsibilities over the product of their labour seem to decrease considerably. Individual women, or men from other communities, take over. This is particularly so when there is no other organised institutional arrangement like a cooperative.

Women do not venture out fishing at sea. Nowadays there are the exceptions. Their visible presence is most evident at the fish landing sites – either in their role as wives of the fishers waiting to take fish home for consumption, or as fish buyers, or both. Along with men from other communities, women take a very sharp and keen interest in the fish which is landed, particularly if they are involved in its processing

and/or marketing. Women who take fish to market therefore get more opportunities to interact with the world outside their coastal spaces. The social interactions resulting from their commercial transactions, with rural and urban consumers, make them more out-going and astute in their dealings with people from outside their own socio-cultural spaces. As I learnt very early in my career from women retail merchants in the village – their “capital was in their tongue” and not in their purses!

One way to look at this gendered division of labour is to say that men’s labour ‘creates the value by converting the stuff in nature into a resource’. Women’s labour on the other hand, usually quite immediately, ‘converts that resource into monetary value’. A question therefore arises. How do we equate or calculate the worthiness of these different activities and roles, of men and women, in the realm of productive labour, when one form of labour cannot happen without the other? They are inextricably intertwined. When we discuss gender equity in fisheries, this question is something we should hold up seriously in our thoughts.

To me, the issue of gender equity in the activities of the fish economy is therefore a matter of how we perceive them and the attributes we assign to them in the process of assessing all the forms of labour which are undertaken in the productive activities of the fish economy. No form of labour is any less/or more worthy than the other. However, from my own observations, I came to recognise that the moment there is greater ingress of capital into the fish economy from outside the community, it becomes a matrix of activities and sectors creating the possibilities for generating a plethora of different fish chains connecting these different activities and sectors. The forms of labour, and the relationships between women and men along the fish chains is altered – sometimes radically, sometimes slowly. I have articulated this in both my more than four-decade old CDS working paper on understanding the fish economy of Kerala and my 1978 EPW article on the entry of big business into fishing and its impact on the fish economy.

However, when we move from the realm of labour in the productive economy to labour in the household -- including activities relating to care giving and to re-production of labour -- we have a different scenario. Here, it would seem that gender roles get excessively (stereo) typed. Girls and women are ‘expected’ to do the cooking, cleaning, provisioning for the household and caring for the children. And of course, women have the ‘burden’ of producing the future fishermen and women!

Men, on the other hand, may involve in some occasional household maintenance and pampering of the children, and young boys

perhaps undertaking some odd jobs outside the home which are supportive of the work of women.

In my observations of fishing village life and the functioning of the fishers cooperative, my interactions with women were either on the beach or in the office of the cooperative where they brought in the fish sales receipts of their husbands to be encashed. This was a time when it was possible to talk to the women and to understand the roles they played in the present and the future of small-scale fishing communities. My simple (simplistic?) assessment then was that behind successful fishermen, there were women and girls whose labour and perspectives about life were crucial to that success. In 1986 – that’s now three and a half decade ago -- for ICLARM’s (WorldFish) 10th anniversary report, I wrote an article titled “*Empathy and Struggle: Elements in a Future for Small-scale Fishing Communities.*” Let me reproduce a few paragraphs, based on my understanding at that time, from what I said about the Rightful Role of Women in that article: (Quote) Let me start with the most neglected aspect: that of the place of women in fishing communities. One important lesson I learnt in my involvement with small-scale fishing communities was to look for the women behind the households of successful and happy small-scale fishermen. Often it is the wife, sometimes with the help of an elder daughter, that shoulders the prime responsibilities for the sustenance of the household – keeping it together as a contented social and economic unit. The fishermen’s success is really a function of his skills, perseverance and the integrating and supportive role played by his wife.

Women in small-scale fishing communities tend also to be more open and receptive to change, primarily because they interact more regularly with the larger social forces in society than do the men who spend more time away at sea. This is particularly so when women are involved in the marketing of the fish. I have also found that women in small-scale fishing communities are more sensitive to the deteriorating quality of life and the environment. Consequently, they have more educated hearts when it comes to the rationale of conservation and the need for a more harmonious relationship with nature.

Many of the good intentioned programmes tailored to the development of small-scale fishing communities have a strong gender bias stressing excessively the role of fishermen and thus fail to appreciate the dynamic role that women play in the economic, cultural and moral life of these communities. With the increase in the number of women social scientists and community activists in different developing countries, now working closely with small-scale fishing communities, we should expect more action on this front.

The recently formed International Collective in Supportive of Fishworkers (ICSF) which discussed fisheries development from a feminist perspective recorded in its statement of shared concern: We acknowledge the important role that women play in the sustenance of the marginalised fishery sector and are aware that they remain out of the mainstream of decision-making processes. We feel strongly that the condition of the fishworkers will not improve unless the situation and the potential contribution of women are given primary attention. It is not too late for the rightful role of women to be stressed and accorded appropriate attention. (Unquote) It took me a while to realise and understand that gender is not about the way we have been created as being female or male (and now more recently the consciousness that it is possible to be in-between these two). And gender is not only about pushing for greater role for women.

Gender is about the way we are taught to *perceive the roles* which we accept for ourselves, and for the functions we undertake as we perform our roles as female or male. It is about our upbringing, which in turn is considerably influenced importantly by social, cultural and

religious matters. Gender is therefore not about the body which nature has gifted us. It is more about the mind and attitude which we acquire by the manner in which we are nurtured.

However, when viewed from a global understanding, it is abundantly clear that the outcome of this nurturing has resulted in women getting an unfair deal on all aspects and indicators of human development which we value as part of our common humanity. And undoubtedly, the lack of equity in gender relationships may seem to be greater today, in many of the countries which have been designated as “developing”.

Consequently, gender, and gender equity, is not about including women in every activity which men are involved in -- or the other way around, as many may think. Specific human societies have evolved to assign particular roles for women and men in different economic, social, cultural and re-productive activity. To an outsider of a particular society, this assignment may seem strange, unfair or even a matter *without* choice. But in most societies, these assigned roles also evolve, and at times change radically. This is a function of many factors that may be endogenous or exogenous to the

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What is most needed is our true empathy in fostering and supporting the struggles of the women and men in the communities as they negotiate their approaches and tactics in creating the spaces, alliances and networks, which will result in a true liberation from the forces which constrict and constrain them

society in question. This can be so in fishing communities as well.

Attaining gender equity warrants freedom. And freedom lies at the heart of justice. It is largely about how one can create facilitating and enabling conditions to allow men and women the freedom to achieve and fulfil their own capabilities. There is certainly no perfect solution for this. As Amartya Sen posits in his book “The Idea of Justice”, it is about “*how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice, rather than to offer resolutions of questions about the nature of perfect justice.*”

And thus, it is with gender equity too. Where there are obstacles and deprivations, they need to be removed. Perhaps this cannot (should not!) be done in one dictatorial sweep. Working with both men and women together in the process of action and decision making is the key to bringing about change in gender relations. While there is the part about changing our bodily actions, it is much more about the way we change the thinking of our minds.

In the fish economy -- and I say this based on my experience not only with Christian fishing communities in India, Buddhist fishing communities in Cambodia and Muslim fishing communities in Indonesia -- the greater inter-dependencies between women and men in the fishery activities, and their dual roles in protection of the eco-system in which they are placed, provides greater opportunities to raise the issue of gender equity and create a more gender-equal fish economy and community.

The strategy to achieve this must be multi-pronged and deal with creating more inclusive workplaces, educational opportunities, re-skilling, health and care systems, possibilities for more equal participation in leadership positions in economic and political bodies (cooperatives, trade unions, local political structures etc) and the freedom and opportunities to be argumentative. In short there is need for planning and embedding greater gender parity initiatives in all the realms to ensure a more just, participatory, self-reliant and sustainable future. We may never reach the perfect situation – by must work towards it with hope.

The SSF Guidelines uses the overarching frame of international human rights and the state’s obligations under this, as the entry point for ensuring gender equity. However, the SSF Guidelines also stresses the fact that “*these strategies to achieve gender equality require different approaches in different cultural contexts* (8.1)”

The scope for using the various Chapters (Thematic Areas) of the SSF Guidelines, as an advocacy plank for achieving gender equity and social justice is considerable -- but will vary depending on the economic, socio-cultural and political context of the country.

Responsible governance of tenure and tenure rights, particularly with regard to riparian land for homestead rights, is one realm where achieving gender parity will give a great fillip to gender equity. It is well known and noted that even where fishers have rights of access to the fishery resources, their rights to riparian land are far less secure. This lack of land rights is one important reason for the poor habitat conditions in many fishing communities. Altering this situation, and providing title to women for the homestead, will be a major move to achieve better social development translating to higher human development indices and social justice in the long run.

Sustainable resource management is another realm where achieving gender parity will valorise the contextual knowledge of fishers – particularly women’s perspectives which tend to be more holistic and are the result of their keener perceptions and attitudes of care and nurture. The knowledge of fishermen is more oriented to understanding the prey-in-context. But note that the knowledge- systems of women and men from fishing communities are more trans-disciplinary when compared to that of modern scientists.

Social development, which includes inter alia, housing, health, education, energy, sanitation, are public goods which are human rights for which the state has an obligation towards all its citizens. In India, fishing communities have been outliers in attaining these rights. In states where they have been achieved, there is a strong correlation with the collective action measures which have been spear-headed by women in the fishing community, often with the facilitation of civil society organisations. Here again, what we witness is that, it is in the struggle for enhancing capabilities through social development that the seeds for attaining gender equity also lie. Women are always the worst affected when social development standards are poor.

Value-chain, post-harvest and trade are key realms in the fish economy where gender parity needs to be ensured. World over, when men enter these realms, it is always with a greater advantage due to issues like their greater access to finance, to the use of infrastructure, market information and so forth. It is observed that women who make a mark in these activities often work in groups and collectives pooling their finances, facilities and their enormous resourcefulness. Identifying such initiatives among women and helping to foster them will be a major step in ensuring greater gender equity leading to sustainable businesses and livelihoods for women.

Disaster risks and climate change are known to result in increasing gender inequality. One important reason for this arises from the fact that both the planning and execution



Fish market at Mumbai, India. It is observed that women who make a mark in these activities often work in groups and collectives pooling their finances, facilities and their enormous resourcefulness

of adaptation and mitigation measures are undertaken without adequate and proper, quality consultations with coastal communities. Only with such consultations will the proximate and the ultimate causes for increased hazard and risk, and importantly their differential impact on men and women, be identified. Since it is the marine fishing communities who first experience the impacts of disasters originating at sea, including the effect of “creeping” climate change, the documentation of their experiential reality and the accumulated knowledge and perspectives which they garner through experience is invaluable. Scientists and others dealing with these issues from the macro-global levels need to consider more trans-disciplinary approaches which will contribute greatly towards better predictions and greater risk mitigation. Such participatory processes alone will contribute to valorising people’s knowledge and contribute to greater gender equity and social justice.

Legal provisions, participatory guidelines, trans-disciplinary workshops and the several other means which we – academicians and

practitioners – are demanding and bidding for, may be one means towards achieving gender equity and social justice.

However, I sometimes wonder whether our preoccupation with new found wordings, idioms of speech, academic frameworks and looking for wicked problems, are at times usurping, purposely distracting and even preventing the emergence of people’s actions from below. In our efforts to ‘understand, interpret and reinterpret’ the world do we stubbornly remain as ‘inert catalysts’, and in this process unknowingly delay the efforts of the people to ‘re-envision and change’ the world?

In my opinion, what is most needed is our true empathy in fostering and supporting the struggles of the women and men in the communities as they negotiate their approaches and tactics in creating the spaces, alliances and networks, which will result in a true liberation from the forces which constrict and constrain them.

Currently, the discourse and the narratives of fisheries, coastal zones and oceans – consider the pervasive Blue Economy fashion for example

– are becoming increasingly more and more oriented towards greater pursuit of material well-being and financial profits. Humans are no more are the centre.

The subjective, experiential and the relational elements of our well-being within which we are called to situate the material analysis cannot be lost out. These are the elements of human relationships which are most precious and which we cannot afford to – using the language of the market – trade- off for other gains.

Lived experience of survival and struggle is complex and evolving. It cannot be understood by approaching it from any particular discipline or many disciplines. Yet, it cannot be understood without lived experiences and disciplines. I think this is where going “between, across and beyond” towards a new transcendence becomes important.

Thank you. ❧