

Rendering Visibility

The lived experiences of women fisherfolk in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal how invisible they remain in policies and programmes

Despite the significant size of the fishing industry in the Philippines and the fact that fish is a huge part of Filipino diets, fisherfolk remain among the poorest in the country. This is particularly so for small-scale fisherfolk and those concentrated in municipal waters. In a newly released survey by the Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA) measuring the incidence of poverty among 10 of the 14 basic sectors in 2018, fisherfolk were second only to farmers. (The Philippines Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act defines 'basic sectors' as disadvantaged or marginalized groups, including farmers, fisherfolk, women, children, persons with disabilities, self-employed and unpaid family workers, and individuals residing in rural and urban areas.) Poverty incidence among farmers is at 31.4 per cent, while for fisherfolk it is 26.2; these sectors also posted the highest poverty incidence in 2015, at 40.8 (farmers), and 36.9 (fisherfolk) per cent. Fisherfolk and coastal communities are faced with a number of social and economic challenges as a result of poverty and the unsustainable development of the fisheries sector.

Women fisherfolk: Invisible, under-valued, under-represented

In a sector that is already considered poor, women fisherfolk are among the poorest—largely because of roles and contributions that are not recognized or are undervalued; the lack of access to modes of production and resources; and their multiple burdens, at home, in the community and also as small-scale fisherfolk.

As fishing has been largely a male occupation, the prevalent notion is that only men go fishing in their boats and women are not involved in fishing. In practice, however, women go out to sea

to fish and are involved in shellfish and fry gathering/gleaning, spear fishing in rivers, and reef fishing using scoop nets, traps and fish baskets. Women participate in activities before, during and after the fish capture. They are part of small-scale fisheries in municipal waters, and some are also employed in commercial fishing vessels, mostly in post-harvest processing. However, participation of women before and after fish capture has been given little importance, leading to the near invisibility of women as important contributors to this sector.

Women participate in activities before, during and after the fish capture.

The under-representation of women fishworkers in data and policy is attributed to this gendered division of labour predominant in fishing communities. Women's contributions are often seen as extensions of their care work, usually done in private, and consequently, undervalued. This leads to a vicious cycle where lack of data gives rise to gender-blind decision making, which, in turn, translates into inadequate policies and programmes. Starved of resources, women's work is undervalued, and therefore likely to be further discounted.

Social protection

Women fisherfolk in the Philippines continue to be disenfranchised in terms of access to benefits, social protection and participation in policymaking. (These issues were raised in a training programme of gender focal points, sponsored by the Commission on

This article is by Krissi Shaffina Twyla Rubin (gewhrc.chr@gmail.com), Officer-in-Charge, Centers for Gender Equality & Women's Human Rights, Commission on Human Rights, Republic of the Philippines



16 Women fishworkers in Calintaan, Matnog municipality in Sorsogon province. COVID-19 poses several challenges to women fishworkers' livelihoods, due to supply chain disruptions and the closure of processing operations and markets

Human Rights, in February 2020.) Many women are poor and resort to migration for better opportunities. They also face various forms of gender-based violence, including incest, statutory rape, trafficking and prostitution, and discrimination in access to resources and services on a daily basis.

This marginalization of Filipino women fisherfolk is rooted in various factors. These include the prioritization of commercial fishing and coastal reclamation projects over the protection of small-scale fisherfolk; the problematic implementation of the Fisheries Code; climate change and degradation of the environment; the absence of a gender lens in fisheries policies and programmes; and the persistent 'machismo' in the sector.

Women fisherfolk under the Magna Carta of Women

In the Philippines, efforts have been undertaken to recognize and value the role of women fisherfolk. Under the Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710), fisherfolk are included in the list of marginalized sectors. The law defines fisherfolk as those:

“directly or indirectly engaged in taking, culturing, or processing fishery or aquatic resources. These include, but are not limited to, women engaged in fishing in municipal waters, coastal and marine areas, women workers in commercial fishing and aquaculture, vendors and processors of fish and coastal products, and subsistence producers such as shell-gatherers, managers, and producers of mangrove resources, and other related produce.”

The definition provided by the Magna Carta of Women (MCW) is important as it covers women's various roles in fishing, including pre- and post-harvest work. It sought to address the invisibility of women in the sector. The law further enumerated the rights of women fisherfolk, particularly in relation to equal access to productive resources (Section 20).

Marginalization

However, despite the provisions of the MCW, many issues remain. Accounts of continuing marginalization persist; there are still accounts of limited access to resources as well as cases of gender-based violence. Much remains to be

done to fulfill the promise of the MCW, more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and women fisherfolk

Like many of the marginalized sectors, women fisherfolk are among the worst hit by the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a substantial number of fisherfolk already below the poverty line, suffering from reduced catch, and constrained by restrictive government policies and the absence of support, the economic havoc brought about by the pandemic has increased the vulnerability of the community, especially women.

Globally, it has been reported that small fishing boats, fish markets, and women workers are among those worst affected by the pandemic's economic impact on fisheries. As commercial fishing reportedly fell by 6.5 per cent in 2020, small boats were mostly restricted to port, with their markets uncertain. This has largely affected women who make up at least half of the labour force in fisheries and fish farms. Challenges included restricted market access, due to supply chain disruptions, and the closure of processing operations and markets, where many women are engaged.

In the Philippines, small-scale food producers like farmers and fisherfolk have been severely affected by the pandemic. In a webinar organized by Greenpeace Philippines and others in May 2020, fisherfolk described the difficulties they faced during the lockdown, including food insecurity, and loss of income and productivity brought about by limited mobility, closure of markets, prohibition on fishing, closure of ice plants and long checkpoint queues resulting in fish spoilage. In continuing to leave their home to fish, to find markets or areas to barter their catch, women fisherfolk run the risk not only of infection but also of arrest. One woman from Pangisda in Bataan reported how a fisherfolk member was arrested by the *Bantay Dagat* (marine and coastal patrol) for going out to fish during the 'enhanced community quarantine' (ECQ) and how her money, meant for food, was spent on bail.

These are but initial stories. With the pandemic control measures stretching into the year, there are many other stories from the ground on the impact on fisherfolk, especially women.

Gathering stories on the ground

To gather more stories, the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines, through its Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights Center and 16 regional offices, conducted sectoral monitoring of women fisherfolk. The Commission's regional offices undertook key informant interviews and/or focus group discussions aimed at highlighting issues faced by women, namely, the roles they play in the sector, their participation and access to resources, their experiences of gender-based violence, and the impact of the pandemic.

The initial results reveal that traditional gender roles in fishing communities persist. While there are exceptional cases where women go out to fish alone, husbands usually insist that women stay at home and

Women continue to be relegated to reproductive or care work; their contributions to the sector are mainly focused on post-harvest activities...

take care of the children, or they privilege men's capability as fisherfolk. Women continue to be relegated to reproductive or care work; their contributions to the sector are mainly focused on post-harvest activities, including sorting of catch, allocating for household consumption, fish processing, marketing and sale.

Domain of men

On recognition of their work, women's responses reveal that despite recognition under the Magna Carta of Women, the term 'fisherfolk' remains associated with 'capture fishing' and the domain of men. In one region, for instance, 53 per cent of women interviewed by the Commission do not consider themselves as fisherfolk, and 83 per cent are not on the list of

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE PHILIPPINES



18 A focus group discussion with women fisherfolk in Talisay, Cebu province. While there are women fisherfolk organizations, these are few and far between, compared to male dominated organizations

the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) of the Department of Agriculture. While there are women fisherfolk organizations, these are few and far between, compared to male-dominated organizations. Women who were interviewed also revealed that some of them participate in meetings of these organizations, but mostly to represent their husbands, with very limited decision-making powers. Women are thus marginalized not only by government agencies, but also within fisherfolk organizations.

The monitoring also provided insight into the women's level of awareness of their rights under the Magna Carta of Women and other laws, and of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on them. Responses from the women reveal that many of them were not familiar with the provisions of the MCW. There were women who did not consider themselves as fisherfolk despite clearly falling within the definition under the MCW. Many also admitted to being unaware of government programmes targeting fisherfolk during the pandemic. This highlights persistent gaps in the

implementation of the MCW and the need to ramp up information campaigns and service delivery in fishing communities.

On the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the responses of women highlight the adverse effects, such as food insecurity, loss of income, multiple burdens and heightened anxiety. Women shared how the lockdown resulted in reduced incomes and difficulties in accessing markets. One senior-citizen fish vendor from Talisay, Cebu, said, "I cannot easily sell my product. Most of our previous customers do not have money." This was echoed by women in another region, who complained that their income was affected by the strict community quarantine. They were unable to eat regularly.

Welfare schemes

Women's registration as fisherfolk with the BFAR determines their access to available government relief and welfare schemes. Those who were not registered or were not members of any fisherfolk organizations said that they were unable to access government

support. In some instances, there was confusion about which programmes they could access and which were accessible only through their husbands, who were often registered.

While very few women shared accounts of gender-based violence during the pandemic, many described different forms of violence—including intimate partner violence, trafficking and rape—in their communities in the past. Some of these continued during the pandemic. These accounts reveal that the violence is not only rooted in gender inequality and male dominance, but also in poverty and food insecurity. One woman in Cebu said, “One time when my husband came home from fishing, he asked me for food. We did not have a good dinner because we had no money. I showed him the bowl of vegetable soup and he asked me to heat it. When it was done, he poured the boiling soup on my face. It was painful and I got burns.” In another instance, one respondent said that some women in her community had to resort to sex work to buy food. In another account, a husband was reported to have beaten his wife because he had no income to feed his children. These anecdotes from the women affirm the continuing threat of violence against women, before and during the pandemic.

From policy to practice

The monitoring conducted by the Commission provides snapshots of experiences, instead of a comprehensive research overview. They come from the 100-130 women fisherfolk who agreed to be interviewed in the 16 regional offices of the Commission. They cannot speak for all women fisherfolk in the country, but the lived experiences provide us an insight into the often invisible situation of women in fishing communities. It is clear for us in the Commission that we need to do more to fulfill the promise of non-discrimination under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and under the Magna Carta of Women. There is a need to move from policies—the *de jure* protection and entitlements under the law—to actual changes felt in the everyday

lives of women fisherfolk, their *de facto* enjoyment of rights.

Some of the key recommendations forwarded by women fisherfolk themselves include the following: Recognize and render visible women fisherfolk in all fishing communities. This means ensuring women’s meaningful participation in fisherfolk organizations, their recognition as fisherfolk distinct from their husbands and sons in government databases, and developing organizations dedicated to supporting women in the sector.

Support for women fisherfolk—in the form of financial and livelihood assistance, low-interest loans and gender-sensitive fishing equipment—was also recommended.

Women also require enhanced mechanisms for protection against violence, such as strengthening the capacity of women, their organizations and of the Barangay Violence Against Women (VAW) desks in fishing communities.

Recognizing rights

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of women’s access to information on risk prevention, support services, medical services and to remedies in cases of violence. It is crucial to ensure availability and accessibility of life-saving information for marginalized communities, including women fisherfolk. If we are to address the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to focus on the most marginalized and work towards recognizing their needs and the fulfillment of their rights. 📌

For more

Towards gender-equitable small-scale fisheries governance and development - A handbook

<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/fee037d6-944f-4d65-89ba-b438c7d41834/>

A Roadmap for Recovery

https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_85/4526_art_Sam_85_art21_Philippines_DinnaL.Umengan.pdf

Women in Fisheries in Asia: 1978–2016

https://www.icsf.net/images/yemaya/pdf/english/issue_51/2216_art_yem51_e_art07a.pdf