

Making women matter

Examples from coastal countries in South Asia illustrate how fisheries management is doomed to fail if it ignores the importance and diversity of women's work in the fisheries

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Fishing was long considered a male occupation, and women were thought to be involved only in post-harvest activities. However, there is a growing recognition of women's contribution in capture fisheries in all activity spheres.

This article is based on a report by Kyoko Kusakabe titled 'Gender Issues in small-scale Inland Fisheries in Asia: Women as an important source of information'. Although the report was written more than a decade ago, its findings continue to have relevance for policy makers and community-based organizations aiming to address the gender question in the fisheries.

Kusakabe found that South Asia heavily employed women in the small-scale inland fisheries sector. In China, rural labour force statistics for 1991 showed that women accounted for 26.3 per cent of the rural labour force in fisheries. In parts of India, women netted prawns from backwaters; in Lao PDR,

they fished in canals; in the Philippines, they fished from canoes in coastal lagoons.

In areas where male migration was prevalent, women were bearing heavier responsibility in fisheries. Even as far back as a decade ago, some estimates showed that at least 50 million women from developing countries were employed in the fishing industry.

In Yunnan, in rapidly-

developing China, when the Trans-Watershed Water Supply Project flooded the Lashi watershed, neither women nor men could carry out their farming activities and became increasingly dependent on fishing. To quote a woman fisher: "Before the dam was built, we had land and women practiced agriculture. Women's income was better and more stable than men's income ... Though our culture does not allow women to go fishing, about 50 per cent of the wives now go fishing with their husbands. Women work to support the family. Staying home will lead to a decline in their position."

Kusakabe discussed the research of a social scientist named Yu Xiaogang who in 2001 attempted to juxtapose the different areas of knowledge of women and men and come up with sustainable fisheries management of the Lashi reservoir. Discussions with the men revealed that the highest fish yield was from March to June and the lowest from October to February. Discussions with women revealed that fish prices were lowest from March to September and highest from December to February. Farm work, done mainly by women, was heaviest from April to June. This led to an understanding that the newly introduced fishing ban from April to June could be beneficial if men helped women in agricultural activities during this time. This would protect fish during the spawning season, and thus higher yields could be expected during winter when prices were highest. By combining both women's and men's knowledge and by adjusting their activities, this case showed that higher benefit and more sustainable use of natural resources could be realized.

Another example of leveraging women's knowledge was from Guinea in West Africa. Here, under an arrangement known as *kostamente*, women could buy catch from fishermen—either their husbands or unrelated men—or they could repay a share of the profits after processing and selling fish. Under a United Nations project aimed at empowering women, at fostering solidarity, and improving productivity, income and working conditions, women were organized into groups and trained in better techniques for treatment and storage. The project however failed, and an analysis revealed that a number of inappropriate assumptions had been made.

First, the project assumed a sharply dualistic division of labour. Because women undertook the fish smoking activities, it was assumed that men had no role to play, whereas in fact, all production involved interdependent activities between men and women. In targeting women alone, the project threatened

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A fish vendor at Kampong Phluk, Cambodia. Women dominated the retail trade of small fish from the Tonle Sap Lake and from rice fields

this interdependence. Some men raised their prices because they perceived the women as part of an externally funded project. By assuming that all women had the same interests, diversities in age, conjugal rank, class and religion, which were real obstacles to solidarity building were ignored. Further, the project imposed regular hours for attendance and work that conflicted with the many other claims on women's time.

Another example from Lao PDR illustrated the challenges facing women fish traders. In the Nam Ngum Reservoir in Lao PDR, fish marketing is controlled by a fish dealer company, and small fishers and small fish traders, mostly women, are not able to sell directly in the market. A certain community in the region received external support in credit and equipment to improve their fish processing activities. However, the lack of access to markets nullified the benefits of this support. Women, being responsible for household financial management and no longer being able to rely on income from fish processing, sought cash income from other activities like banana planting, home gardens and raising livestock. This increased their workloads. Women in fishing groups therefore worked, on average, 12 hours for productive work, of which seven hours were for fishing. In contrast, men spent an average of 6 hours of concentrated time in fishing. Thus, restricted access to markets affected both women and men, but women were affected more severely.

In Cambodia, Kusakabe found that fish from Tonle Sap Lake served the domestic markets and were exported to Thailand and Vietnam. Large fish from the Tonle Sap were bought by licensed fish traders under the supervision of a formerly state-owned fish export company. This market route was dominated by men and most of the fish exported to Thailand. Women dominated the retail trade of small fish from the Tonle Sap Lake and from rice fields. These were sold in domestic markets or smuggled into Thailand on a small-scale and sold to smaller middlemen on the Thai side. However, the women's market route was more significant than the formal trading route in terms of providing the poor with protein. It also employed many independent traders and created employment for low-income women.

These examples showed the diverse nature of women's engagement with fisheries, in addition to various other responsibilities necessary to maintain their families. They also showed how a detailed and nuanced understanding of the role of women in fisheries is critical to ensure effectiveness of any intervention to empower and benefit fishing communities.

(This article is based on a thematic report by Kyoko Kusakabe, titled 'Gender Issues in Small-scale Inland Fisheries in Asia: Women as an important sources of information', Asian Institute of Technology, 2003.)