

# Half the fishers in the world

**Tracing the road ahead for women in fisheries in Asia, a continent that produces the most fish and supports the largest number of fishers in the world**

By **Nikita Gopal**  
(nikiajith@gmail.com),  
Principal Scientist,  
ICAR-Central Institute of  
Fisheries Technology,  
Cochin, India

Fishing and the fisheries are a major source of food and livelihood for millions of people in Asia. Many Asian countries like China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam are major fish producers. The fisheries policies in these countries have centred on increasing production over the last two decades. This has resulted in investments in centralized infrastructure development, along with introduction of bigger sized crafts, gears and different fishing systems. In many developing and less developed countries in the region, this has had government funding.

Though there are boundaries defined to differentiate fishing zones for traditional small-scale and larger vessels in the region, policing of the violations is difficult and often inadequate. Conflict situations are also observed between different fishery users in the countries in the region. On the whole, over capacity, increase in population, and decrease in available resources has led to the increased vulnerability of small-scale fishers. Fishing capacity increases have not necessarily reflected in increased per unit catches or better returns to the primary producers. Fisher producers have become fisher labourers working on bigger crafts, or are migrating out of the sector. Fishing trips are becoming longer and less economical. Another key development during the last

two decades has been the influx of electronic communication, and the fisheries sector has witnessed increasing use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for both backward and forward link activities.

A major shift in production has been the emergence of aquaculture as an alternative to capture based fish production. By 2006, most of the production in the sector came from culture. In many countries in the region like Thailand, Vietnam, Bangladesh and India, major fish production comes from aquaculture rather than capture fisheries. Many factors such as unsustainable and over exploitative practices of many capture based fisheries, climate change induced impacts, and development activities along coastal areas have also had an impact on coastal fisheries and aided the growth of aquaculture. Aquaculture is more akin to agriculture and many of the factors of production can be reasonably controlled. Though there are many risks associated especially with regard to disease outbreaks and environmental concerns, this sector is growing and will continue to occupy an important place in future fish production. The past two decades have seen many countries evolving policies to develop aquaculture, with an eye on lucrative export markets. For developing countries in Asia and elsewhere, fish trade is clearly a significant source of foreign exchange. The growth of aquaculture has seen the emergence of a new class of non-fisher entrepreneurs, with coastal farmers shifting from rice cultivation to shrimp farming. This trend was also visible in an earlier era, when the capital intensive mechanization of capture fisheries shifted the ownership of vessels into the hands of non-fishers.

Women have been an integral part of fisheries. All over the world, studies have acknowledged that women form half the workforce in fisheries, especially in Asian countries. With small-scale and often subsistence fisheries and aquaculture dominating, it is imperative for the fishing communities that both men and women engage in the sector, which is a source of food and income for their families. However, the sector has strong gender divisions of labour, hosting much invisible women's work in fisheries and in fisheries production chains, and limiting women's access to the means of

SIBASIS GUHA / CIFT



A woman feeding in aquaculture pond, India. Women contribute in almost all activities right from pond preparation, stocking, feeding, and to harvesting

**Women's work in the fisheries, being subsistence and family oriented, remains invisible.**

production in fisheries and in aquaculture because of cultural taboos and practices.

Women have always been a dominating presence in marketing of fish, mostly in retail trade. They have been traditional processors of fish and also contribute to the growing labour force in the industrial processing sector. Though not so highly noticeable, a small proportion of women have always been involved in fish capture, often using nets and traps in inshore waters and inland water bodies. They have also gleaned for molluscs, crustaceans and fish. Fry collection for aquaculture is carried out by women in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in inter-tidal waters. However, closed seasons in various areas due to conservation efforts have made these areas inaccessible and have affected livelihoods. We also have women diving for crustaceans, molluscs, coral and other fishes and seaweeds in Japan, Korea and India. Evidence from certain countries suggests that women are working on commercial fishing vessels but they form a very small minority. Women as harvesters have always engaged in subsistence fishing to make ends meet for their families. Women are rarely encouraged to take up fishing, as fishing has always been thought of as a male preserve. Post-capture activities are a niche area for women, be it sorting the landed catch, or in processing and marketing and processing. In the industrial fisheries too, commercial processing is dominated by women in most Asian countries, including India, Thailand, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

The changes in the fisheries sector have affected women in many ways. The increased mechanization and the centralization of landings to bigger harbours from the beaches have meant loss of employment for the fisherwomen, who once were the custodians of fish after landing. Women took over in the supply chain thereafter, and engaged in the marketing or processing of fish. In India, for instance, fishing operations have shifted from beach landings near fishing villages to more urban based harbours. The landed fish is now auctioned and marketed through institutionalized labour organisations in these harbours. Women find it difficult to penetrate this set up. It has also meant travelling from their fishing villages, disrupting set work regimes and increasing workload. Women have also lost the bargaining power they once enjoyed, when the landings were within their reach. Now they have to depend on the auctioning being carried out in the harbours, and their resources do not permit

them to be active in the process. A change that may be noticed, however, is that many women are becoming auctioneers or agents of auctioneers.

While women continue to be active in fish marketing in most Asian countries, the physical conditions are still very dismal. Upscaling their fish businesses is a problem because of lack of resources, and they continue to be small players in the larger scheme of things. Aquaculture, being similar to agriculture, should have seen more participation of women. However, here too they continue to be near invisible. A recent study by the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific across Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR that focused on small-scale aquaculture systems (see the article 'Women in Aquaculture' in this issue, based on this study) found that women were present in all the major nodes of the aquaculture value chains. They contribute in almost all activities right from pond preparation, stocking, feeding, water management and healthcare, to harvesting. Since they are seldom categorized as hired labour and contribute mostly in the form of family labour, the invisibility was high. In industrial processing, the shop floor almost entirely comprises women's labour, involving working long hours and standing in cold conditions that are required for processing. However, in all countries, it has been observed that women are disadvantaged as far as the wages are concerned and invariably earn less than the men engaged in this industry. The working conditions also leave a lot to be desired.

On the whole, women take on a range of work within the fisheries and within fishing communities in Asia. The nature of work varies with the social and cultural distinctiveness of their countries, but the underlying similarity is that it is rarely seen as being 'productive'. Though it is acknowledged that women are the custodians of traditional knowledge about their natural environment and resources, women's work in the fisheries, being subsistence and family oriented, remains invisible.

Largely limited to the post-harvest sector and marketing, women in the fisheries face limitations in their scale of operations as a result of low levels of both investments as well as risk-bearing abilities due to lack of access to resources like institutional credit and technological innovations such as ice boxes and proper storage mechanisms. Though initiatives in micro-credit have helped women from other sectors to begin

micro-enterprises, they have largely been under-utilized and not completely effective in fisheries. Studies in India and Philippines have shown that micro-credit can often be diverted to meet family needs. Women need to find ways to exploit the opportunities to tap micro-credit, and utilize it effectively, as credit from other institutional sources may continue to be difficult to obtain.

Even when women are actively engaged in economic activity, it has been observed that their income is not always under their own control, which poses a big social challenge. Poor physical conditions of work have been highlighted quite often, but continue to get little or no policy level attention or field level intervention. This is the case in both marketing and processing. To equip women to meet the changes taking place with regard to electronic devices and applications, skill development training opportunities must be made available. Technical training in other fisheries related areas such as management of aquaculture farms and other fish related businesses are also required.

A larger, but more important, issue is the disruption or displacement of lives and livelihoods due to anthropogenic or natural factors. Development initiatives, climate change impacts and natural disasters call for mitigation strategies that must also include capacity building, especially to help women to meet the emotional as well as physical aspects of the losses they incur. In most natural calamities, women are seen to be the more vulnerable.

For women to be able to articulate their concerns and needs, formation of formal

organizations is essential. The one network that was established in the late 1990s and still continues to be active is the Mekong River Commission's 'Network on Gender and Fisheries' active in the Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR.

This network aims to improve the visibility of women's contribution in the fisheries sector. It works towards suitable policies and programmes to support their work and it tries to improve women's decision making power in the household and community, and at the government and policy level, highlighting fisherwomen's achievements in the region and initiating programmes for their benefit.

Will mere inclusion in fisheries related activities be able to empower women? This is a question that needs thought. Often it has been observed that attempts at inclusion have meant increased workloads which are not commensurate with returns. Sensitivity to gender issues is still low, not only within households and within the community but also among extension personnel who work with fishers. Development efforts by governments and NGOs are inadequate and existing legislation usually poor. The lack of appropriate and relevant sex-disaggregated databases adds to policy blindness—a problem which, if addressed, could serve as a basis for effective planning.

Programmes need not be considered as 'women programmes'; the involvement of the community as a whole is required. The participation of women in all areas in the sector, from resource management to policy decisions, must be ensured. ■