

# Women in today's fisheries economy

**At both the micro- and macro-economic level, the impact of the fisheries economy is deeply gendered—a problem that must be addressed through explicit, affirmative action**

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The economy is the most significant factor in how the fish sector operates. When considering how economic events affect fisheries, gender impacts are rarely examined, even though many impacts are gender sensitive. Our current state of knowledge merely hints at the gendered impacts of the economy. This has to change; economic arguments must be added to the social agenda for gender equality in fisheries.

Fisheries enterprises extend from micro-livelihood enterprises to large multi-national corporations. Those who work in fisheries businesses, directly and indirectly, may be labourers through to top level executives and owners. In aggregate, according to the 2012 World Bank 'Hidden Harvests' study, nearly half of the workers are women, concentrated in but not limited to the processing sector and marketing jobs. Although the statistics are not available, studies on small scale fisheries would indicate that the large corporations, though important, are not the major

employers; instead, the World Bank found that the majority of people (women and men) are engaged in small-scale fisheries.

Fisheries enterprises, small and large, are driven by demands for, in priority order: profitability, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. All these demands have economic facets. At all scales, businesses strive to produce products in an efficient and lucrative manner, and to find suitable markets. Governments are expected to create and maintain the regulatory and political environment by, for instance, preventing illegal activities, creating incentives for local jobs while keeping the prices of fish low for consumers, and supporting markets. Business and regulatory settings, however, are now operating amid a global economic slowdown, facing risks of erratic changes, for example, in energy prices, the shifting world economic order and political conditions affecting markets, such as trade preferences and sanctions.

In today's economy, what are the implications for people, especially for women? My reflections on this question come under two main themes: impacts viewed at a macro, if not fully macro-economic, level, and those at the household scale. As fisheries economics pays scant attention to gender, our understanding of social impacts is often weak, and hence my reflections may be considered tentative.

Three key issues with important economic dimensions are the economic imperatives of business competition, globalization, and access to resources.

From catching to selling, fish supply chains are competitive. Competition comes from such conditions as the increasing buying power of large supermarket chains that shave their suppliers' margins in order to lower prices and win market share, and competition with other animal proteins in the food basket. Supply chain costs, especially labour costs, are under constant pressure. To keep labour costs down, local labour will be sourced at low rates, or processing located in areas where low cost labour is available, or product shipped to places where labour is cheaper, or processes automated. These labour cost factors apply to self-employed people in the sector through the returns on their own labour.

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Women mincing fish at the Hann Fish Market in Dakar, Senegal. The large majority of women in the fish sector are poor, wage labourers, and/or engaged in small scale operations

National governments often aim for increased women's participation in paid employment as a means to improving the economy. As fish exports from developing countries have burgeoned, along with exports from other sectors, so too have jobs in these areas for women and men. In fish processing, women provide much of the labour in the production lines, often with unequal pay for the same work as men—for example, the women in salmon processing plants in Chile, as discussed by Eduardo Ramirez Vera (See *Yemaya* 48). In some cases, the lower rates paid to women may mean they are given jobs in preference to men, but this aspect needs assessment.

A recent World Bank study in the Solomon Islands found that women's wage rates were not sufficient to cover their needs. Sometimes, the lowest paid women took time off to do higher paying outside work, so they could meet acute financial needs, such as school or medical costs.

At sea, those vessels that fish at the margins of profitability, and even legality, source their male, often migrant, crew at the lowest cost and employ them under frugal, sometimes exploitative conditions. This too is an economic and gender issue, but it is primarily framed as an issue of basic human rights. Again, cost cutting is at the base of these labour practices.

As in any sector, the balances between enterprise profit, workers' pay rates and work conditions, and consumer prices can create a fine line between low paid jobs or no jobs, if factories relocate or close down when they determine that local costs are uncompetitive. Similarly, self-employed workers may not survive in fish work if they cannot pay their own labour and other costs.

To survive within-industry competition, enterprises can pursue economies of scale through mergers and acquisitions. In the fish sector, economic power is getting concentrated in fewer, larger companies. Already, Swedish researchers have reported in PLoS One that 13 large corporations control more than 10 per cent of the marine catch. In Norway, a paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF4—see [Genderaquafish.org](http://Genderaquafish.org)) reported that as salmon aquaculture became concentrated in the hands of fewer, larger companies, women's participation dropped from 20 per cent in 1990 to 9 per cent in 2010, largely due to the absorption of small and medium family farms into the large companies.

The second macro-economic factor is globalization, long a feature of this major trading sector. In specific locations, globalization has brought many opportunities and challenges by creating and taking away jobs for women and men. In a gendered sense, the balance of work gains and losses is not known but artisanal scale work for women has often been lost as fish is increasingly landed in ports, rather than on the beach, and enters more distant, higher value markets. Jobs can be exploitative if the new work is not carried out in fair and safe conditions. In some countries, such as Bangladesh, some action has been taken to ensure secure workplaces that adhere to International Labour Organization and domestic laws. Attention from the international media, non-governmental organisations and importing countries holds the promise that work in most export supply chains will be just. However, under globalization, the location of many supply chain activities is transferable and so, long term local employment is not guaranteed.

The third macroeconomic issue is the gendered access to natural resources, for example, fisheries stocks and aquaculture sites, which are the basis of economic value. According to Angela Lentisco and Robert Lee in a recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) circular, a small and growing body of studies show that women's primary access to fish resources is typically informal, undervalued and fragile. Where fisheries for the same resources serve different markets—for example, local and export markets for invertebrates such as octopus and sea cucumbers—women tend to serve the lower value part of what economists would call a “two sector system”.

In aquaculture, the types, scales and capital intensity of enterprises often are segregated by gender and/or scale, as described in a number of Kerala case studies by Ramachandran C Nair's at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3—see [Genderaquafish.org](http://Genderaquafish.org)). Commercial mussel growing in Kerala was originally started through women's self-help groups for poverty alleviation. Once profitable, farming became attractive to the more cashed-up men's enterprises. In law, the women's legal rights to sites and space were not secured. From the outset, by contrast, the rights for finfish cage culture were protected. These enterprises, that are more capital intensive than those for mussel farming, are run by men.

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The gendered outcomes of macroeconomic settings are observed in household economics and intra-household effects. Households that depend to any extent on the fish sector experience the same economic conditions of non-fishery households and, in addition, several sector-specific impacts.

General economic issues that are also expressed in fishing communities include the complexities of unitary versus multiple household accounts. The assumption of unitary household accounts has been the basis for most developmental assistance to the fish sector: assistance agencies have assumed unitary household accounts and delivered aid to men's activities, expecting financial improvements to flow directly to all household members. From the early work of Rosemary Firth in coastal Malaysia to more recent work by Marilyn Porter and colleagues in Tanzania, fishery households have often been found to run multiple household accounts. In a household, whether women earn or control the money earned or not can have a major impact on gender equality.

Another generic micro-economic feature that also holds in the fish sector is the greater burden of reproductive, care and unpaid work done by women. This has been revealed in numerous studies on the gendered division of labour in fisheries households. Women often perform unpaid fish sector work and bear the load of (also unpaid) reproductive and care work.

Features that are more specific to household economies in fisheries are the intra-household stresses and changing gender roles now being seen in localities where fish stocks have declined. Nelson Turgo, and Alice Ferrer and her colleagues have reported on changes in Philippine fishing households. As survival strategies, women and men have broadened their respective household roles to overlap in unpaid chores and income generation. Although barely whispered in the fish sector, violence against women is also a feature emerging as a result of households under economic stress from reduced male income and less masculine roles.

Migrant labour at sea has received media attention but not for its impact on the households left behind. Recent studies are starting to reveal the intricacies of migrant labour in fish farming, for example, on Burmese workers in shrimp farms in Thailand

by Arlene Nietes Satapornvanit and on Mexicans in catfish farms in the Mississippi in the USA by Kirsten Dellinger. In such cases, couples are often hired, creating a 'two for the price of one' setup and less security for women in the contract labour partnership. Also, little attention is given to the family left behind, such as children and their grandparents.

Much has been written in the last decade of the sex-for-fish trade, in Africa and parts of Asia and the Pacific. Beyond the initial reactions, research has revealed more nuanced stories in which the economic power of the women can have a major impact on the agency of women in such trade relationships. Regardless, such trade should be seen as a part of the fish economy, driven not only by personal circumstances but by the scarcity of fish and its value.

Apart from the small number of women who may be owners of major capital or related to large fisheries capitalists or in executive positions in fisheries corporations, the large majority of women in the fish sector are poor, wage labourers, and/or engaged in small scale operations. If they are entrepreneurs, they face the double discrimination of being women and small scale. A few assistance programmes are now starting to discover the opportunity of raising the business skills of these women as a possible pathway out of poverty.

Short of stopping capitalism, which is the driving force behind the economic trends, better economic and social outcomes for women and men need explicit action. If left only to the market, the current trends and their gendered impacts will intensify. Depending on the impact and its context, suitable actions would have to start with effective implementation of the gender and related elements of the Voluntary Guidelines for Small Scale Fisheries so as to cover the largest number of affected people, regulations to establish fair labour codes for paid employment, affirmative action for women's rights of access to fish, and long overdue attention by fisheries economists to gender. On this last point, fisheries economists could do well to learn from the field of feminist economics. A key journal in this field, *Feminist Economics*, gives its goal as to "not just develop more illuminating theories, but to improve the conditions of living for all children, women and men".