

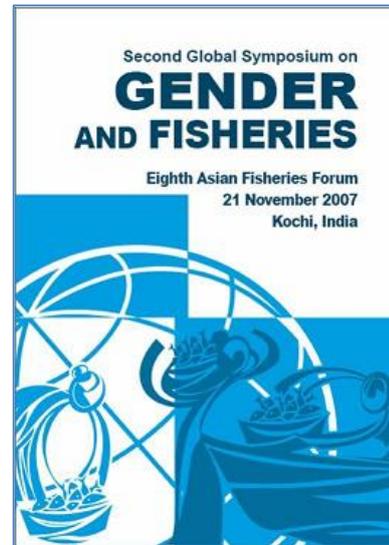
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WOMEN ADD VALUE TO FISHERIES

By Meryl J Williams



Fisheries and aquaculture have been very slow to focus on gender. Fortunately the tide of attention to gender in fisheries and aquaculture is turning, driven in part by the special series of women and gender symposia held by the Asian Fisheries Society at their triennial forums over the last 10 years. And gender attention does pay off. For example, from the 2001 Women in Fisheries Symposium we reported on new revelations that HIV/AIDS was a serious problem in many fisheries communities around the world. By exposing the issue publicly, Uganda, and the other Lake Victoria countries were alerted and they now have specific strategies and actions for overcoming the problem in their fishing communities.

Recently, in Kochi, India, the 21 November 2007 2nd Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries showed that the gender lens produces a better picture of fisheries issues, one that is more complete, better focused and provides the basis for taking more appropriate action. The gender lens also reinforces the importance of an integrated and complete supply chain approach to understanding fisheries.

A common conclusion from the many studies reported was that enhanced women's contributions, especially when they create more progressive household and family enterprises, add value to the sector. As fisheries resources become over-exploited and as aquaculture develops rapidly, women, men and children will all contribute.

Using stories from selected papers, I would like to highlight some of the themes of the Symposium, especially the fisheries of our host state, Kerala, marginalization, globalization and the fish supply chain, aquaculture extension and policy and recognizing gender in fisheries statistics and institutions.

Kerala Fisheries

Kerala papers featured in the Symposium, partly because the Symposium was held in Kochi but also because of Kerala's intrinsic interest as India's 'land of women' – the state with the most positive women's development indicators, except in the case of the fisheries sector. Presenters pointed out the social contradictions in Kerala and its fisheries sector, a sector where women's literacy rates lag the state average and the

fisheries population sex ratio is strongly biased towards men. Can the gap be bridged by economic trends such as globalization and institutional efforts such as self-help groups?

Holly Hapke used Kerala as a case study for understanding gender and globalization, its nuances and the local factors that shape a person's or groups ability to adapt to changing economic settings. Her analysis revealed how the local ecological crisis of fisheries was causing households to diversify out of fisheries, through means that depended on each households' assets, its member's education levels and the wider economy. Fishing households, however, still relied on fisheries and increasingly on women's as well as men's work, which were interdependent.

Ramchandran Nair, who shared the best paper award, studied two fish-dependent Indian communities – the tuna fishing community of the offshore community at Miniocoy of the Lakshadweep islands and the onshore Kerala bivalve farmers. He analysed how men and women use their working and living spaces. He found several key gender challenges. For example, the prosperity of the tuna boom brought HIV/AIDS with it and the silent bivalve farming revolution unleashed by women also tended to disempower their husbands.

In one study, V. P. Vipinkumar applied a Group Dynamics Effectiveness Index for 15 women's Self Help Groups (SHG) of the Malabar coast of Kerala. SHGs are an Indian movement to reach the poorest people, especially women, with micro-finance and other interventions that have recently reached fisheries and aquaculture. The Malabar SHGs were undertaking bivalve farming, fish drying, processing and value addition. The Effectiveness Index correlated well with the SHGs' enterprise benefit:cost ratios. In all the groups, poor living conditions and the challenges of marketing products were the main constraints. SHGs also take time to develop, up to 3 years to achieve the full self-help phase.

Marginalization

Fishing peoples often live on the margins of society, the women in their communities even more so, even in more developed countries.

Katia Frangouides reported on surveys of the women in the French province of Brittany, which yields 40% of national production. Though Brittany women play little role in fishing at sea, they perform critical fishing support work in management and administration, product transport and sales and in boat and gear maintenance. Since 1998, wives of French fishers have been permitted new legal status options that open up their access to state retirement pensions. However, less than 40% of wives have taken up the options, due to low empowerment, lack of clarity on the tax implications and little social welfare data on the numbers of women eligible.

Another form of marginalization is lack of access to many financial services. Arpita Sharma profiled the social and economic status of 4 types of women fish workers in Dakshinda Kannada district of Karnataka state, India – dry and wet fish retailers and laborers – and their needs in small scale financial services. In addition to micro-finance and savings, the women wanted financing for micro-enterprise development, insurance, remittances, and microfinance for housing and shelter. While agreeing with the better design of microfinance services to meet women's need, the Symposium

participants also pointed out that very little attention is being given to men's microfinance needs.

Marginalization can also occur within households. Umesh Goswami's studies of undernutrition among women in fishing households in the lower stretches of the Bramaputra river valley, India, were initiated after incidences of night blindness, likely caused by Vitamin A deficiency, were reported in this area. Males and children of both sexes consumed much more of the fish catch and hence received more of the Vitamin A than the women. His study revealed that 95% of women had some degree of Vitamin A deficiency, whereas men and children showed almost no deficiencies. Furthermore, the administration of measured servings of *Amblypharyngodon mola* (mola, a small freshwater fish high in Vitamin A and pro-vitamin A) overcome the symptoms of night-blindness in men, women and children in 10 to 18 days, pregnant women taking longest.

Globalization and the fish supply chain

Driven by the importance of fish as a global trade commodity, a growing trend in fisheries research is to consider the whole value chain or fish supply chain. This trend has special significance for gender studies in fisheries as the studies reveal the role and issues for women and children, as well as men.

Charlotte Howard's study of vulnerabilities throughout the supply chain of fish from capture in Lake Selingué through to the city markets in Bamako, Mali, Africa, revealed the utility of a gendered approach. The study identified a key intervention point, namely securing access to credit for ice and transport, particular problems for women, to limit post harvest losses which cascaded down to households and communities.

In Kilwa district on the southern coast of Tanzania, Africa, people in the Somanga and Songosongo Island communities remain remote, poor, dependent on marine resources and yet strongly connected to global markets such as for seaweed and octopus. Marilyn Porter's gendered analysis revealed that people in these remote communities are integrated into the world markets at the lowest level. Their produce is valued so they cannot afford to eat it themselves and yet they ultimately retain no negotiating power over its price.

The seafood processing sector of India has been export oriented since the 1950s. In Veraval, Gujarat state, India, Nikita Gopal studied women in 5 European Union approved factories as part of a wider effort to understand seafood export sustainability. The study found women overwhelmingly clustered in the casual contract labor category on the factory floor, and almost totally absent from administrative, professional and regular staff categories. Two thirds of the women were migrants, largely from Kerala and Tamil Nadu, working to support their families and dependent on the weak social security provisions of their contractors who escape the Indian laws covering migrant labor. Social audits, which are routine in some export factories in other sectors, should be conducted to ensure that labor laws are respected in these factories, in a similar way that the factories are audited for export product quality.

Environmental degradation and disasters

Environments degraded slowly or rapidly by natural and human induced disasters also play out differently for the genders and for minority peoples.

Barbara Nowak analysed the livelihood activities of the Btsisi' households of Peninsular Malaysia. These indigenous coastal people, whose livelihoods were won by exploitation, usually in family groups, of diverse and temporally changing resources, have adjusted their gender roles to cope with declining resources and resource access. Daily working partnerships between men and women are breaking down and livelihood options are reduced by oil palm plantations, privatization of land and commercial overfishing.

To compound the steady and inexorable depletion of coastal resources, on August 11 2006, Guimaras Island in the western Visayas, central Philippines, was hit by the worst oil spill in Philippine history when the vessel Solar I ran aground. Rose Asong and Alice Ferrer presented results from two gendered studies of coastal people affected, especially men and women who are boat operators, resort owners, fishpen laborers, fishers, salt makers, fish processors and vendors and seaweed growers. Yet, staged interventions from emergency response, to second phase clean up, rehabilitation and recovery efforts have received little gender focus to date.

In the rehabilitation and restoration phase of social welfare efforts following the devastating 26 November 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation established 41 Self Help Groups in Tamil Nadu to help 750 women. The women traditionally depended on traditional fishing activities and were helped successfully into mud crab fattening in floating cages in back waters and shrimp and fish pickle manufacture. Women's fish vending was also revived.

Aquaculture policy and extension

The common themes of all the aquaculture papers were how to mobilize women's entry to the sector, especially as active members of the family effort, and how to enhance their skills as aquaculture becomes more developed and efficient.

In West Tripura, in Tripura state, India, M.C. Nandeesha, in the co-award winning paper, sought to develop a gender and ethnic-inclusive aquaculture extension strategy to reach the West Bengal and tribal people. Women's involvement in aquaculture led to significantly higher production. Only about 2% of women had attended training, and eighty percent of women gave 'never invited' as their reason for not attending; two thirds were prepared to attend if invited and their husbands were generally supportive of the wives being trained. The researchers have presented the results and policy recommendations on family-centered, flexible training programs to the state government which is now acting on this advice.

In the Central Terai of Nepal, a participatory research and development project targeted ethnic Tarau women, who traditionally fish the rivers, streams and rice fields, for training in carp or tilapia farming in small farm ponds. Ram Bhujel reported that yields averaged 4.5 t/ha/yr, contributing an average of 15% to family income. The impacts were social – families were happy with their pond achievements, husbands and wives worked together, financial and empowering for the women, and improved family nutrition. More project sites and ethnic groups were added after the first phase

and vegetables added to the farming mix. Farming cooperatives formed of family and community groups are helping the enterprises to become self-supporting.

From the 4 different technology aquaculture components of the Greater Noakhali aquaculture project, Bangladesh, Kyoko Kusakabe reported that an impact assessment survey found no increase in women's intra-household decision making and little change in the division of labor. However, women reported greater self-confidence and mobility from working side by side with their husbands. The lesson is that aquaculture extension is not just about imparting knowledge but also about improving the participants self confidence in ways that are culture and gender-specific.

In many fisheries the women play the role of 'collaborating spouse', but, since 1996 in southern India, women have been the main adopters of the new technology of green mussel farming, according to Kripa V., an aquaculturist who helped develop the technology. In Kasargod, Kerala, India, she found that women's Self Help Groups have been the main drivers of production increases. Beyond increased production, other benefits of mussel farming have rippled out, including creating significant labor for other village women in ancillary activities such as seeding and coir rope production. Women have proven capable of managing the farms, especially by turning them into family businesses, while often having to manage sensitive issues with their husbands over managing the finances. An opportunity exists for technology developers and promoters to take the new industry to a new level.

India is starting to react to the global opportunities for cultured ornamental fish. Inspired by this, P.K. Sahoo's work sought ways of bring these opportunities to women fish farmers in Orissa state, India. After several earlier attempts faltered, a new model has succeeded. This approach popularized aquarium keeping in local and semi-urban areas and included local youths in the marketing for the women, and generated a local aquarium construction industry.

Biswanath Sadangi of the Indian National Research Center for Women in Agriculture reported how the Center was turning its attention to understanding the gender needs in village aquaculture. The most common motivation of the women was 'to earn more income relatively easily'. Of the types of aquaculture studied, ornamental fish culture was most likely to elevate family living standards; women involved tended to be young, educated and market oriented. Community based farming required different rights and transactional support to all other types where rights to farms were already defined, and all types needed access to technology demonstration and training in their areas of need.

Officially recognizing gender

Most gender and fisheries research projects lack baseline data disaggregated by gender and, on a local scale, are forced to collect most of their own data. Existing fisheries data collections typically refer just to the fishing operations themselves. In India, however, women's work is documented in the 2005 Indian Marine Fisheries Census. Somy Kuriakose described a major data mining exercise using the Census data. Of 3.5 million people living in 750 thousand coastal fishing villages, 1.7 million were women and 21% of these were involved in fisheries work. Gender, geographical, cultural and other disparities indicated policy relevant results such as that Orissa and West Bengal state have the greatest women's untapped potentials. Even in more

advanced states like Kerala, women's involvement in marketing leaves much room for improvement.

Institutional support is critical to 'making gender and fisheries stick' and this has been well demonstrated in the Lower Mekong Basin countries – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Hap Navy and Wolf Hartmann reported that now, the Network on Gender and Fisheries has been granted a seat on the policy-based development network, the Technical Advisory Body for the Lower Mekong Basin countries. Having achieved a seat at the fisheries policy table, the challenge is now for the Network to clarify what promotion of gender and fisheries really means.

Contacts and additional information (updated 11 June 2011)

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