

# INFOFISH

*International*

5/2018 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER)



ISSN 1571-5976 Pp. 4399062013 (032953) PRICE: US\$10.00



INFOPESCA • INFOFISH • INFOPECHE • INFOSAMAK • EUROFISH • INFOYU

# EXPANDING THE HORIZONS: FROM NURTURING FISH TO NURTURING SOCIETY

By Meryl Williams, Nikita Gopal, Kyoko Kusakabe, Arlene Nietes Satapornvanit, and Hillary Egna

Women make up half the labour force in fisheries and aquaculture, yet the gender dimension receives scarce attention. Gender should be a core concern for three compelling reasons: valuing women's contributions broadens benefits for everyone; gender-blind policies and practices undermine women's contributions (which largely remain hidden); and society and the environment, as well as fisheries and aquaculture, would benefit if women were empowered. These themes will be aired at the 'Expanding the Horizons: Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries' Global Conference this October 2018.

## Fisheries and aquaculture have a man's face

Generally men are associated with catching fish. Yet, women's efforts also are behind every bite of the fish that we taste. From catch to consumer, about half of the fish production workers, traders, and marketers are women, although their roles and contributions are overlooked. Without women's work, the fish catch would drop, fish delivery to the consumer would not function, and households would have less access to fish and food.

In the 'modern' lens of fisheries and aquaculture, the focus has been on fish resources, technology and profit, rather than on people and society. With growing human population and increasing fish demand and fishing pressure, the priority has gradually shifted from catching and raising more fish, to sustainably increasing production, improving efficiency and product quality. These changes bring into view social, community and legal dimensions, such as the importance of small scale fisheries, inclusive management approaches, the need to control illegal operations, corruption and the social injustice of slavery at sea.

Despite this broadening agenda, gender has not become a mainstream issue. Gender was not a topic on the agenda at the recent 2018 biennial FAO Committee on Fisheries



Small scale entrepreneur in Community Fish Market preparing high quality threadfin (*Eleutheronema spp*) to enter urban markets, Thailand.

credit photo: Supaporn Anuchiracheeva, Earth Net Foundation, Thailand.

Meeting, and it received only passing references in the 2018 State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture report. The goal of gender equality, nevertheless, is included in some policies, research programmes and advocacy. For example, it is a guiding principle of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Small-Scale Fisheries, and a theme in the Asia-Pacific Fisheries Council's Sustainable Development for Resilient Blue Growth of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

Through the *Expanding the Horizons: Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries* 7th Global Conference (GAF7) in Bangkok from 18-21 October 2018, we want to elevate the priority for gender. Being co-led by the Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section of the Asian Fisheries Society and the Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand, this is the first stand-alone fisheries conference on gender. It builds on workshops, symposia, seminars, special sessions and photograph competitions on women/gender equality held for over more than 20 years and will capture the knowledge of over 100 experienced and emerging experts.

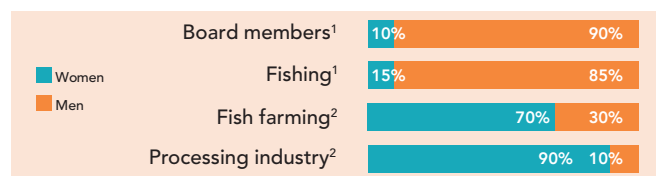
In preparing for the Conference, we present three reasons why gender equality matters in fisheries and aquaculture:

### Valuing women's contributions broadens benefits for everyone

Along the path from catch to consumer, gender limits the roles women play and therefore their contributions and benefits. Often, the expectation is that women are satisfied just to be employed.

At the industry's front-end, an estimated 86% of workers in fishing and fish farming are men. But in post-harvest, processing and marketing, the majority of fish workers are women, leading to estimates that women comprise half of the world's 120 million fish workers. But this does not mean that women produce half the fish or bring in half the money. Women have smaller enterprises, lower pay, and riskier work. We have no estimates of the gender gap in productivity, but numerous studies on gender divisions of labour and the stresses women experience, e.g., from harassment while working, indicate it will be substantial.

#### Where are the women in the seafood industry?



<sup>1</sup> WSI Article 2018 <https://wsi-asso.org/media/>  
<sup>2</sup> FAO. World Bank

The International Organisation for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) conducted a 'Gender on the Agenda' online survey from September to December 2017. Complete results are available at : <https://wsi-asso.org/wsi-reports/>

Women's roles and their contributions vary with scale. Female-led fish production, processing, and marketing enterprises are usually small-scale. Men dominate leadership of large-scale fishing operations - like industrial fishing vessels and fish farms. In processing factories, few women are supervisors, managers, and CEOs, but women make up the majority of factory floor workers, mainly in the lowest paid positions. Men on fishing vessels are higher paid than women in fish processing, while gender norms often prevent women going to sea.

In Norway, the number of women in aquaculture dropped from 20% in 1990 to 9% in 2010 as many smaller-scale family farms were bought out by larger corporations. As companies amalgamated and operations were scaled up, communities faced increasing local unemployment. Many workers were forced to migrate to find work. In Indonesia and Vietnam, as shrimp farms get larger, women's participation shrinks. Even where women are involved, they describe the situation as "high involvement, low benefit."

Treated as a reserve army of labour in fish processing, local women and migrant workers of both sexes often have the most dangerous jobs, risking accidents, chronic pain, and

damage to limbs from constant task repetition while working in wet and cold environments. These workers are also the lowest paid, with little job security. This allows companies to lower costs and stay competitive in global markets, but at the cost of violating workers' basic social and human rights, and risk losing access to markets. Male migrant worker slavery in fishing has recently been under the media spotlight, but everyday exploitation of women's labour - widespread within the industry - has received virtually no attention.



Weighing seaweed harvest, Zanzibar.

credit photo: Cecile Brugere, UK.

As well as physical stresses in processing factories, boat landing sites, fish markets and factories are unsafe working environments. Here, women report facing harassment and gender-based violence from fishermen, male retailers and local authorities, inhibiting their productivity. Some women choose to become mobile fish vendors, avoiding these areas as a strategy to ward off harassment. But this is not an ideal long-term solution. Women often lack capital to buy fish, so they are not able to buy fish from fishers, instead buying more expensive fish from middlemen, or trading sex-for-fish.

Women's businesses are marginalised and spaces for women to operate are limited. Overcrowding of women in fish markets leads to severe competition, and further dampens their income. Frequently, once a market is established, men traders begin occupying the spaces hitherto meant for women who are squeezed out. In Cambodia, the women cross-border fish traders have difficulty teaming up to secure their rights. There is strong motivation for individualistic competition in their trading relationships with Thai merchants.

#### Gender-blind policies and data undermine women's contributions

When it comes to fisheries and aquaculture policies and data, the rights and needs of women are ignored.

Few countries break down fisheries data by sex. From 2009-2014, only 27% of FAO Member countries reported sex-differentiated employment data for fisheries and only 33% reported them for aquaculture. The statistics did not cover

processing, marketing and other employment in the catch to consumer pathway, thus ignoring the majority of women. FAO global fisheries and aquaculture employment statistics for 2016 were broken out by sex for the first time.



*The smile belies the fact that business is difficult for this woman vendor who has been allocated a marginal market spot.*

*credit photo: Nightingale Devi, College of Fisheries, Chhattisgarh Kamdhenu Vishwavidyalaya, India.*

Most policies ignore gender, and in any case, the impacts of policies on women cannot be investigated without data on their roles, inputs and the trends. The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995), a far-reaching global agreement led by the FAO, was silent on gender; it now has more than 50 instruments and technical guides but these again do not cover women and gender.

The Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2014) set a precedent as the first global policy to include gender equity as a guiding principle. But similar gender equity requirements are lacking in most other fisheries and aquaculture policies, including in market-based certification and auditing schemes. Yet, women can play important leadership roles in sustainable certified projects. Vietnam’s female-led Ben Tre clam fishery, for example, is the first fishery in Southeast Asia to receive Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification.



*Norwegian woman fisher with cod (Gadus morhua)*

*credit photo: Anne-Lise Ekrem, Norway.*

These policy and data gaps reinforce the invisibility of women. Women are often not recognised as fishers or fish farmers, further downgrading their contributions. In some societies, the social norm is to consider women’s work secondary and less important than men’s. Husbands, employers, and even women themselves may view their work as an extension of unpaid household or community work. Women typically earn less pay than men or receive only partial pay given as a couple’s wage. Some women work without any pay at

all, especially on family-owned enterprises. On some shrimp farms in Thailand, migrant couples from Laos, Myanmar and Northeast Thailand are given a couple’s wage.

Governments favour policies to increase exports, modernise and intensify production, establish larger, even offshore, farming, and replace beach landings with urban markets. Financial investments by the private sector are gender blind. That is, they do not take gender into account when transforming catch-to-consumer fisheries operations by consolidating, scaling



*Women peeling prawns in a factory in Bangladesh.*

*credit photo: Mohammad Nuruzzaman, Krishi Gabeshona Foundation, Bangladesh.*

up, centralising and automating operations. In many of the roles that women play— like manual fish processing and small-scale marketing — women are left without work when their skills and assets are not upgraded to adapt to changes like new processing technologies and cleaner, larger markets that reduce waste.



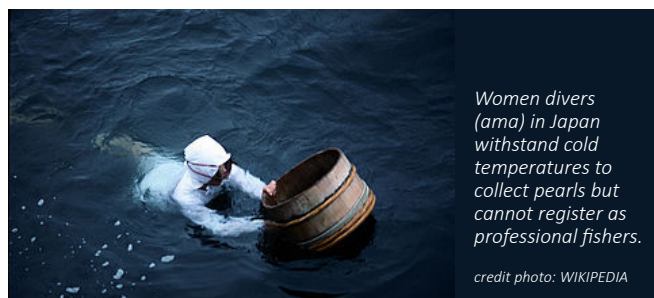
*Tuna processing line, Solomon Islands (2009).*

*credit photo: Amanda Hamilton*

Even when women participate in the traditionally-male roles of fishing and fish farming, they are often denied full rights and benefits under existing policy. In Japan, ama divers cannot attain registration as professional fishers, in contrast to men fishing from boats who are registered members of Japan’s Fisheries Cooperative Associations.

To fight for their rights to become legally registered fishers, own fish farms, or obtain better terms and working conditions in the marketplace or factory, women have had to organise into advocacy groups. In Galicia, Spain, women shellfish gatherers have organised collectives to achieve professional status as fishers. Co-governance arrangements with government agencies facilitate sustainable management of shellfish. In Ghana, women of some ethnic groups finance

fishing vessels and trips, plus process and market their catch, yet have no say in fisheries management. These women are fighting for a voice in fisheries management to enable them to bring in their valuable knowledge.



*Women divers (ama) in Japan withstand cold temperatures to collect pearls but cannot register as professional fishers.*

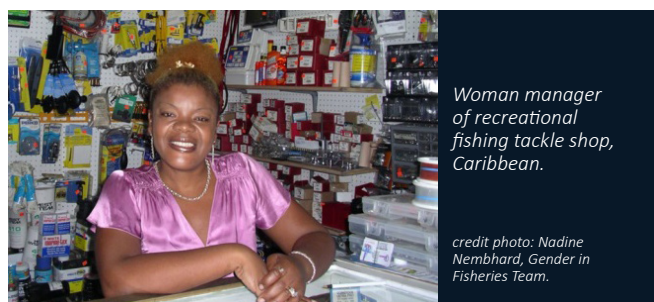
*credit photo: WIKIPEDIA*

### **Society and the environment benefit when women are empowered**

Women cannot be expected to shoulder the whole burden of household care plus working in the catch-to-consumer pathway. Empowering women in fisheries and aquaculture has positive impacts like better care and education of children because of improved earnings and more stable communities.

Social norms around gender roles play a key part in whether women are enabled or constrained in realising their potential, supporting their households, and contributing to social cohesion. Groupings like women, men, youth, and children are more than just social constructs – these categories interact with factors like race, class, and ability in important ways.

Fisheries and aquaculture work can place extra stresses on households, communities and social cohesion, such as when men and women need to migrate for work. To end female exploitation and victimisation by violence and achieve empowerment, community perceptions of the role of women in society, work and their households must evolve. In Africa around Lake Victoria, the practice of sex-for-fish in fishing hubs has created hotspots for HIV/AIDS and the spread of other sexually transmitted infections. Outreach efforts to empower women traders in business, health, and education are expected to provide alternative options for business survival. Similar challenges exist in other parts of Africa and in parts of Asia and South America.



*Woman manager of recreational fishing tackle shop, Caribbean.*

*credit photo: Nadine Nembhard, Gender in Fisheries Team.*

Ironically, fish workers may get very little fish for themselves and some fishing and fish farming communities have less food security than the general population. Within these communities, women and infants are often more malnourished than men. The reason for this is that agencies introducing aquaculture often assume that farmers will benefit from more fish to eat, but in reality, depending on the value of what's grown, workers often cannot afford to eat what they produce.

Thus at the local level, women fish workers are the key to how fish can be utilised to improve nutrition. Innovative aquaculture projects, for example in Bangladesh and Nepal, are addressing this by educating women on family nutrition and polyculture technology – adding small native fish and other species to provide local food, grown alongside those marketed for sale. In the Amazon region of Bolivia, a community project increased local fish consumption and incomes by empowering indigenous women and families to diversify and improve fish farming. Better processing of their fish gave better returns in the market.



*Crab (Scylla serrata) fattening farmer, SW Bangladesh, participating in an AquaFish Innovation Lab project integrating tilapia culture to improve family nutrition.*

*credit photo: Shahroz Mahean Haque, Bangladesh Agricultural University.*

Women can help sustain healthy ecosystems. They often have different knowledge and perspectives on resource and environmental sustainability than men but are typically excluded from decision-making in fisheries management, conservation and aquaculture development. By including women's voices in resource management decisions, better social and conservation outcomes are possible. Sustainable development provides opportunities for gender equality and poverty reduction. Conversely, overfishing, pollution, climate change and environmental degradation further threaten gender equality, often in complex ways.

When fisheries decline, women often hold households together. In Northern Ireland, northern England and northeast Canada, women's involvement in fisheries has decreased over decades of fishery declines. Women have retreated to less prominent, more private roles, with increased responsibilities related to household coping strategies.

The ability of women to recover their livelihoods is disproportionately diminished when disaster preparedness does not take gender into account. Studies on tsunamis, oil

spills, typhoons, floods and climate change impacts reveal that women and girls experience greater casualties and disaster impacts. In the aftermath, women's specialised needs are often ignored. After a serious disaster, fishermen may receive boats from aid agencies but fisherwomen often get no assistance in recovering their fishing and processing businesses. The special health and sanitation needs of women, such as their need for menstrual supplies and pregnancy support, are also often ignored.

## What is to be done and by whom?

The critical players in advancing gender equality in fisheries are: fisheries agencies, including national and leading international organisations, especially the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); development assistance funders; private companies, small and large, at all stages of the catch-to-consumer pathway; fisheries, aquaculture and gender researchers; and grassroots women's and community groups, and civil society. Here is what is needed to make a start:

**Count women and make them visible:** FAO's Committee on Fisheries can put gender equality on its agenda. Fisheries

agencies can collect regular and accurate gender-specific catch-to-consumer employment data to track trends and progress;

**Increase gender-specific funding hundredfold:** Make greater investment in targeted gender projects, research and educational outreach. The present quantum is so small and needs a hundredfold increase to achieve impact;

**Support women's empowerment:** Women can collaborate, assert their rights and upgrade their capacity, if necessary with funding and support for education, advocacy and legal resources. Men's and male-led organisations can become allies in enhancing women's autonomy over their lives and livelihoods; and

**Collaborate on gender:** To make the invisible visible, gender equality must be a stated priority in policy, research, and programmes; and expertise built in the key agencies along the catch-consumer pathway.

Thus, broadening the horizons from simply nurturing fish to nurturing society presents a huge opportunity to create a sustainable and socially-just fishing industry. 🌐



*Dr Meryl Williams is the Chair of the Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section (GAFS) of the Asian Fisheries Society and an Honorary Life Member of AFS.*



*Dr Nikita Gopal is the Vice-Chair of GAFS and Principal Scientist, Central Institute for Fisheries Technology, Indian Council for Agricultural Research, India.*



*Prof Kyoko Kusakabe is Head, Department of Development & Sustainability, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand and member of the Executive Committee of the GAFS.*



*Dr Arlene Nietes Satapornvanit is Gender, Human Welfare, & Capacity Building Specialist, USAID Oceans and Fisheries Partnership in Southeast Asia and Coral Triangle regions and a member of the Executive Committee of GAFS.*



*Dr Hillary Egna is Director of AquaFish Innovation Lab, Oregon State University, USA.*

*\*The first four authors are members of the Organising Committee of the Expanding the Horizons Conference – <https://www.gafconference.org/>.*



Photo: Pradip Kumar Mahato



Gender in Aquaculture & Fisheries Section of the Asian Fisheries Society



Asian Fisheries Society



Asian Institute of Technology