

Recognizing Gender Capability in Promoting Sustainable Fisheries Development and Poverty Alleviation in Fishery Communities

Sumitra Ruangsvakul

Gender is a concept that deals with the roles and relationships between women and men that are determined by social, political, cultural and economic contexts - not through biological aspects. Unequal power relationship between women and men in many cultures mean that women are disadvantaged in terms of their control over resources, access to services as well as in their ability to take advantage of new opportunities and in dealing with ongoing changes affecting their lives.

In the development of small-scale fisheries, policies have traditionally targeted women as mainly fish processors. As a matter of fact, in many cases women's groups in fishery communities typically receive inputs such as improved ovens and credit to enable them to pursue their fish processing functions. It is inherent in human nature that fisheries-related development activities target the men to be engaged in the exploitation and sometimes in managing the resources, whereas women have usually been excluded from planning and "mainstreaming" of fisheries activities. It is pathetic to note that until to date, the implications of women having unequal status to men for achieving positive and sustainable change have not been investigated in policy-making processes, although the repercussions on the social and economic outcomes of such policies should have been significant.

Fish and fisheries products are integral parts of the diet of many cultures and their production has been an important economic enterprise in the fishery communities especially in the Southeast Asian region. It is along this aspect that women have played active role in securing the supply of fish and fisheries products both from the small-scale and commercial fisheries sectors. Nevertheless, women have always been engaged in an assortment of livelihood activities that range from shallow water fishing in artisan fisheries to waged labor in the commercial fishery sector.

In such a wide range of activities, the "invisible" women become important contributors to both national and household food security while their incomes from waged labor are partly responsible for the foreign earnings of the countries (Needham, 2011). The Best Practices for Mainstreaming Gender into Small-scale Fisheries Policies had been developed and being promoted to serve as guide

for policy makers in the formulation of relevant policies (RFLP, 2010). The Best practices had been envisaged to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed into the respective countries' policies for the development of sustainable fisheries especially in the Southeast Asian region.

Importance of Gender Issues in Small-scale Fisheries Development

Even though women may not be usually involved in active fishery operations except in inland and lagoon fisheries or aquaculture, they participate substantially in the pre- and post-harvest operations. The diverse array of women's roles in fisheries apart from their activities as housewives, mothers and homemakers that usually engaged them from dawn to dusk includes their tasks as fisherwomen, fish sellers, fish auctioneers' agents or merchants, as well as in repairing nets, drying and salting fish, and working as laborers for fish processing industries and in aquaculture facilities.

Therefore, in addition to the obvious concerns about fairness, equal opportunity and discrimination, there are good reasons why the role of women should be taken into account in the effective and efficient development of fisheries in Southeast Asia. These are as shown in **Box 1**.

Box 1. Relevance of gender issues in the effective and efficient development of fisheries in Southeast Asia

1. Women make significant contributions to fishery-related activities other than fishing. They play the major role in processing fish and fisheries products as well as in marketing. Although these roles are often very different than those of men, the women have been "invisibly" integral parts of the industry and ignoring these aspects in policy formulation means ignoring also a large portion of the productive labor force in fisheries.
2. The various works done by women generate different kinds of knowledge. For example, while men may know which grounds could be best for fishing operations, the women would know the price that certain fishes would fetch in the markets. Such sources of knowledge are often complementary, as indicated in the example which suggests the need to know where to catch the high-value fishes. Only with the knowledge of both women's and men's opinions and expertise can we understand the fishery sector better and manage its development appropriately.
3. The under-representation of women in decision making takes away a large portion of the available pool of expertise - from both the government and the community.

Gender Capacity in Promoting Sustainable Fisheries Development in Fishery Communities

The SEAFDEC Project on Integrated Coastal Resources Management (ICRM) conducted from 2005 to 2009 in Sihanoukville, Cambodia (ICRM-SV) in collaboration with Fisheries Administration (FiA) of Cambodia included one feature activity that aimed to encourage and extend locally-based fishery resources management to the communities in the project site (Ruangsivakul *et al.*, 2011). Based on the recommendations of the fishers in the project site, a fish *refugia* system for blood cockles was established considering that blood cockles are the most economically important and dominant commodity in Prey Nop II of Sihanoukville.

However, since the area's blood cockle resources had been under the threat due to destruction of the fisheries habitats from rampant illegal fishing by dredgers and also from over-exploitation, the establishment of the *refugia* system was a welcome development as the fishers recognized it as means of conserving the said resource. The establishment of the *refugia* system entailed a series of processes where the fishers were actively involved with. Firstly, the fishers identified the most appropriate species for the *refugia* system based on the criteria that they had agreed upon during a series of consultations. Secondly, the blood cockle fishers group (BCFG) was organized, where 90% of the members are women, and the third step involved the development of self regulatory measures for the *refugia*



area. The direct beneficiary group of the *refugia* system comprises those who are engaged in blood cockle fishing. As a result, the processes undertaken by the fishers during the establishment of the *refugia* system had enhanced the capability of the women leaders in the fishing communities in management aspects.

The processes also increased the awareness of women in fisheries especially on the significance of conserving the important habitat and resources in accordance with their established regulatory measures, and raised the working morale among the members in a harmonized way. Such factors led to the development of a very favorable social scenario in the project site as well as to the decreasing level of illegal fishing in the *refugia* area. Meanwhile, the project has envisaged that the blood cockle resource in the area would be increased year by year thereby improving the livelihood of the fishers in the community.

Gender Capacity in Promoting Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Fishery Communities

From the results of the case studies conducted through the various activities of SEAFDEC related to gender and fisheries development, one of the most significant impacts was the enhancement of the women's good sense and potentials to manage their business ventures and finances (Ruangsivakul *et al.*, 2011). Moreover and as a result, many women's groups have now recognized the need to improve their savings and credit systems in order to reduce dependence from middlemen during the marketing of fish and fisheries products, thus increasing their incomes. In this regard, women could be tapped for the sustainable economic development in fishery communities.

Microfinance services

Informal savings schemes and credit markets are widely developed in many countries and had positively contributed to providing and facilitating access to capital or assets. Being accessible for the users, such schemes have been conducted in more flexible manner and user-friendly in terms of the processes and procedures. Moreover, the schemes have been developed to be more adapted to the clients' microcredit needs. In small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia, the fisherfolks have always been very poor and among the most marginalized members of the communities. However, their low social status is a result of poverty as well as exploitation by middlemen and unscrupulous merchants.

More often than not, middlemen have the tendency to control over credit and fish marketing systems, which drain away whatever surplus incomes that could be generated by

the fish workers. This situation often places the fishers at the mercy of the middlemen and makes the fishers forever indebted to them without any possible way out. Kato (2008) pointed out the many factors that should be considered for the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia. He aptly demonstrated such concerns in a vicious cycle (Fig. 1) where fishers have no way out from extreme poverty, and offered suggestions to address those concerns.

One approach that could provide the fishers a way out from extreme poverty would be through the introduction of micro-financing services. Globally, women constitute the majority of microfinance clients, primarily because of their excellent track records in terms of loans repayment and in sustaining micro-savings. It is a common knowledge that women play important roles in fishing communities that encompass social and economic responsibilities and duties within and outside their households. Women are particularly involved in the productive activities directly related to fisheries production, processing and marketing as well as in non-fisheries income-generating activities where capital would be needed.



Members of women's group in the ICRM-PL project value adding fishery products as alternative livelihood to improve their households' incomes

More importantly, women should be given the opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills not only in fish processing and products development but also in micro-financing. It should be considered that in many cases, the loan requirements of women for their business ventures in fisheries are small but they have the habit of frequently borrowing money to be used as capital. This situation makes women the most appropriate clients of any micro-financing schemes and services.

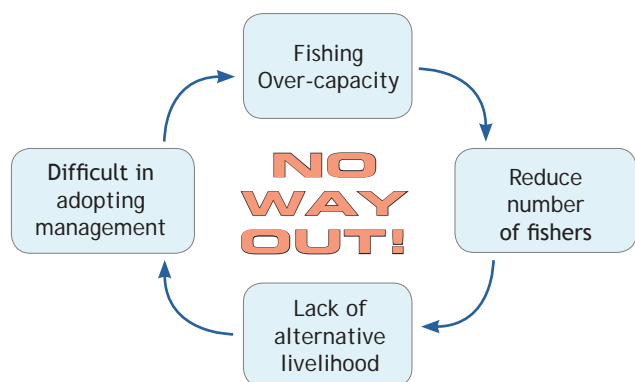


Fig 1. Vicious cycle which continues to trap small-scale fishers in extreme poverty (Kato, 2008)

Fish processing

The SEAFDEC Project on Integrated Coastal Resources Management (ICRM) in Pathew District, Chumphon Province (ICRM-PD) in Thailand, and Puala Langkawi (ICRM-PL) in Malaysia, included activities on the development of local business aimed at increasing the fishers' income and creating job opportunities that could compensate for the fishers' decreasing income from being dependent on the degraded fishery resources. The development of value-added fishery products was therefore considered as means of increasing the fishers' income and where the women played the major role. Considering that the women in the ICRM-PD and ICRM-PL projects had been active members of community-based savings and financing groups, therefore they can have easy access to some sources of micro-financing (SEAFDEC, 2007) for their business ventures.

Thus, the strategies towards alleviating poverty in fishery communities could focus on improving the skills and knowledge of the women's groups in fish processing, product development, and micro-financing. Moreover, the women should also be provided the opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills to be able to contribute to the economic development of their respective communities. In the case of the ICRM-PD and ICRM-PL, the women's groups were officially organized to take advantage of appropriate human resource development (HRD) activities that enabled them to develop their production and management skills in cottage industries with special



Members of the BCFG monitoring the status of the blood cockle refugia under the ICRM-SV project

emphasis on the standardization and improvement of the quality of their products including packaging materials and design, and enhancement of their marketing promotions. For the sustainability of their business ventures and for the transparency of their business transactions, the groups were trained in good book-keeping and accounting systems. Thus, the women's groups were able to learn not only the new techniques of improving their traditional products but also gained knowledge in management, accounting, planning and marketing, and eventually succeeded in increasing their households' incomes.

Way Forward

The 2001 Resolution and Plan of Action adopted during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Millennium Conference in November 2001 did not specifically stipulate the need to mainstream gender in the small-scale fisheries policies. Considering the varying roles that women play in the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries and the contribution of women to the economic development in fishery communities, there is no other opportune time than now to promote the mainstreaming of gender in the national policies on small-scale fisheries.

This is therefore a call to policy makers to consider this suggestion especially that the new decade Resolution and Plan of Action would be developed and adopted during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Fish for the People 2020 Conference in June 2011. In this way, gender capacity in fisheries development could then be formally recognized and enhanced.

References

- Bene, C., G. Macfadyen and E.H. Allison. 2007. Increasing the contribution of small-scale fisheries to poverty alleviation and food security. FAO Fisheries Technical Paper No. 481. FAO Rome, Italy; 125 p
- FAO RFLP. 2010a. The workshop on Best practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector, Siem Reap, Cambodia 2-5 November 2010; 39 p
- FAO RFLP. 2010. Mainstreaming Gender into project cycle management in the fishery sector, FAO Regional Fisheries Livelihood Programme, FAO and AECID 2010; 100 p
- FAO/RAP. 2009. Best practices to support and improve the livelihoods of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture households, 13-15 October 2009, Manila, Philippines, FAO, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 2009. RAP Publication 2009/01; 50 p
- Kato, Yasuhisa. 2008. Considerations for mitigating poverty in rural communities of Southeast Asia through fisheries interventions. *In: Fish for the People*, Vol. 6 No. 3 (2008). Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; pp 4-10



- Needham, Steve. 2011. Shining the Light on the Invisible Woman in Fisheries Development. *In: Fish for the People*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2011). Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; pp 2-5
- NFFCA. 2005. Proceedings of the International symposium on sustainability of small-scale fisheries and fishing communities, March 2005, National Federation of Fisheries Cooperative Associations and The All Japan Seafood Import Consultative Group; 56 p
- RFLP. 2010. Handbook on Mainstreaming Gender into Project Cycle Management. FAO RFLP (in press)
- Ruangsvivakul, Sumitra, Pouchamarn Wongsanga, Virgilia T. Sulit. 2011. Empowering women's groups in fisheries project development and management: SEAFDEC experience. *In: Fish for the People*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2011). Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; pp 6-11
- SEAFDEC. 2007. Proceedings of the Regional Seminar on Integrated Coastal Resources Management in Southeast Asia: Lessons Learned through the Integrated Coastal Resources Management in Pathew District, Chumphon Province (ICRM-PD), 10-12 July 2007, Chumphon, Thailand. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; 240 p
- SEAFDEC. 2008. Proceedings of the Regional Seminar on Integrated Coastal Resources Management in Southeast Asia: Review of the Project ICRM-PL, 21-23 October 2008, Langkawi, Malaysia. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; 204 p
- SEAFDEC. 2010a. Proceedings of the Regional Seminar on Integrated Coastal Resources Management in Southeast Asia: Review of ICRM-SV Project, 26-27 January 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Bangkok, Thailand; 164 p

About the Author

Ms. Sumitra Ruangsvivakul is the Head of the Socio-economic Section of the Coastal and Small-scale Fisheries Management Division of SEAFDEC Training Department in Samut Prakan, Thailand.