



Paving the Path to Gender Equality in Fisheries Policies and Practices in Southeast Asia

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Women play multidimensional roles in households and communities along with their male fishing counterparts. Of the total population depending on capture fisheries, 47% are women (World Bank, 2012). According to current estimates from major fish producing countries, women comprise 46% of the labor force in small-scale capture fisheries related activities, including pre- and post-harvest work (The WorldFish Center, 2010; Kusakabe, 2017).

Based on the review of literature of key developments with regards to gender issues in fisheries in Southeast Asian countries, this paper suggests to include a diagnostic gender analysis in future fisheries research and development endeavors. It also recommends systematic channeling of resources to improve gender equity in fisheries and to ensure capacity development to improve the bargaining power of women throughout the various nodes of fish value chain.

Gender mainstreaming in natural resource management has increasingly become an important approach in addressing gender disparities in policies and practices for many research

and development organizations. However, gender experts and independent evaluators argue that achieving gender equality in research and in mainstream development programs have been a high hanging fruit for long. According to Gopal *et al.* (2017), evaluations of gender in major research, development, and environment funding institutions revealed the long and hard road for gender equity. Each evaluation concluded that while some progress had been made in mainstreaming gender, progress was slow and major challenges had not been addressed (GEF, 2017; ADB, 2017; CGIAR-IEA, 2017).

The fisheries sector is no exception. Kleiber *et al.* (2017) showed that presently, women are not only active in fisheries decision-making but are also often invisible in most fisheries statistics, information on gender barely exist or less developed, and women's interests are excluded from national policies in countries all over the world, regardless of respective national record on gender equality in society. Many of the current national fisheries policies are based on early global fisheries instruments, such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, which were silent on gender equality (FAO, 2012).

As a result of strong advocacy by some non-governmental organizations and women's groups for inclusion, nevertheless, some national fisheries policies have lately tended to recognize women's roles. Yet even in these cases, financial resources may not be allocated, and/or expertise is not available to address the needs (Gopal *et al.*, 2017). This paper tries to unfold how gender issues in fisheries policies and practices have evolved, and the current issues and challenges in Southeast Asia.

The women in fisheries - from invisible to visible

The first Global Workshop on Women in Aquaculture with the vision of recognizing the increasing role played by women in the development of aquaculture was organized in 1987 in Rome, Italy by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The key issues identified in the Workshop that required attention were on the importance of education of women, to increase their awareness to various issues in fisheries, provision of credit facilities, and the need to develop women-friendly technologies (Gadagkar, 1992).

In 1994, the Partnership for Development in Kampuchea (Padek) held a National Symposium on Women in Fisheries in Cambodia, which was successful in bringing awareness and putting forward the changes that required developmental and strategic approaches. The Symposium ended with two key recommendations, 1) development of a country resource paper on women in Cambodia, covering agriculture and fisheries; and 2) organization of a regional seminar on Women in Fisheries in the Indo-China countries (Nandeeshha and Heng, 1994).

In 1995, a workshop was organized by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to prepare a background paper on Women in Asian Fisheries for presentation at the Beijing Conference. This was the time when the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) magazine, *Aquaculture Asia*, featured articles on women in fisheries (NACA, 1996a; NACA, 1996b). These efforts were helpful in setting up priorities for addressing issues on gender in fisheries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (Nandeeshha and Hanglomong, 1997).

Subsequently, the Regional Seminar on Women in Fisheries in the Indo-China Countries was held in 1996 calling for urgent attention to be directed towards gender issues in the fisheries sector, and suggesting the formation of national networks in the region in order to strengthen the activities at the national level (Nandeeshha and Hanglomong, 1997). The Seminar not only brought together interested participants from Indo-China countries, but also attracted the involvement of regional and international organizations like the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM)-The WorldFish Center, Asian Institute of Technology, NACA, etc. In addition, a suggestion was made for the participation

of women in various training programs and the provision of credit to help women initiate activities within their fields of expertise and trade (Williams *et al.*, 2001). The participants then felt that the experience and the impact created at the Mekong region should be shared at the Asian level. Thus, there was a strong recommendation to organize an international seminar on women in Asian fisheries in upcoming Asian Fisheries Forum, where the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) and ICLARM were identified as the most suitable institutions to stimulate this effort.

Based on the recommendations, AFS in coordination with ICLARM held two successful symposia— the International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries in 1998 in Chiang Mai, Thailand and the Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries in 2001 in Kaohsiung, Taiwan (Williams *et al.*, 2001). The Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries recognized the role of women in aquaculture while highlighting the need to sustain production from capture fisheries. It also highlighted the economic contributions of gender to fisheries with emphasis on understanding how gender affects the operations of the sector and what actions and policies could empower the different groups. The Symposium concluded that more research needs to be done to understand fisheries regulations, policies, and plans, and how these could be enhanced by embedding gender and other human dimensions (Choo *et al.*, 2006). A resolution was made in the Symposium to shift the





focus from women in fisheries to gender and fisheries with a view to addressing the issues more holistically.

Inclusion of gender in fisheries

The focus from women in fisheries shifted to gender in fisheries in 2001. Thereafter, the Global Forum on Gender and Fisheries was held in 2014 in Penang, Malaysia. One of the key messages from the Forum was to enhance the fisheries regulations, policies, and plans, primarily to embed gender and human dimensions by mainstreaming gender in all fisheries activities and supports. This was the time when women's roles in fisheries sector in Asia gained much more attention and acceptance. It was recognized that, while men were engaged in fishing activities on their boats, women were heavily involved in small-scale fisheries related activities. From that time on, it has become imperative to consider women's roles in small-scale fisheries' policies and development programs with the aim of improving their livelihoods (Needham, 2011).

As gender issues in general and women's roles in small-scale fisheries in particular started gaining momentum in Southeast Asia, many international and regional organizations slowly started to devise strategies for the inclusion of gender in fisheries development programs. For example, the four-year program Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) started taking initiative in documenting the practical application of incorporating gender in fisheries programs and projects in 2009-2013 (FAO, 2018). RFLP was funded by the Kingdom of Spain and executed by FAO in collaboration with the national agencies responsible for fisheries in six countries – Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam. Its aim was to improve the livelihoods of small-scale coastal fisheries communities, while contributing to sustainable management of aquatic resources. RFLP has worked on five main outputs, which are 1) co-management; 2) safety at sea and vulnerability reduction; 3) post-harvest and marketing, 4) livelihoods strengthening and diversification; and 5) micro-finance services. Also, RFLP had gender mainstreaming as an important crosscutting issue in its implementation.

In 2010, the Workshop on Best Practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector held in Siem Reap, Cambodia brought representatives from various international organizations, government institutions, academia, researchers, and practitioners from the Southeast Asian region to discuss the design and contents of a field manual on how to incorporate gender in all phases of small-scale fisheries development projects. The field manual "Mainstreaming Gender into Project Cycle Management in the Fisheries Sector" provided the rationale, concepts, and approaches concerning mainstreaming gender equality and the role of women in the fisheries sector, the problems they face and possible empowerment opportunities (Arenas and Lentisco, 2011). It also highlighted the tools for gender analysis in fisheries development projects and offered guidance on how to integrate gender aspects at various stages in the project cycle. The manual is available in English, Vietnamese, and Thai languages. Besides the field manual, RFLP developed gender mainstreaming strategy for the RFLP to share knowledge and provide guidance to other projects and programs by sharing the process of gender mainstreaming in the RFLP and the lessons learned.

Finally, RFLP mainstreamed gender into all of its activities across all countries. Some of the outcomes were groundbreaking in the gender and fisheries policy sector. For example, with RFLP support and advocacy, the Government of Sri Lanka has revised its Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act No. 2 of 1996 which did not allow women to be members of Fisheries Committees. This represented an unprecedented opportunity for women to become legal members of Fisheries Committees and to participate in fisheries planning and management. Likewise in Viet Nam, RFLP teamed up with the Women's Union to hold workshops to raise awareness of gender issues among members of fishing communities. The involvement of a large number of men (approximately 40%) helped dispel the impression that gender was women's business and led to far more useful discussions on gender roles in the community.

One of the lessons learnt from RFLP was to recognize women's roles as an integral element of development actions relating to small-scale fishing as women played dominant role in the key RFLP thematic areas related to post-harvest and livelihoods. Therefore, gender aspects in small-scale fisheries should not be an afterthought (Lentisco, 2012; FAO, 2016). **Table 1** below presents chronology of key developments related to gender in fisheries.

SEAFDEC Initiatives on Mainstreaming Gender in Fisheries

Recognizing women fishers as separate stakeholders in resource management, SEAFDEC implemented the Integrated Coastal Resource Management (ICRM) Project over the period from 2003 to 2009 with pilot sites in Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia. The ICRM Project supported the

Table 1. Chronology of events related to gender and fisheries

| Year | Event and/or regional program/project | Research |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1987 | First Global Workshop on Women in Aquaculture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised awareness on various issues in fisheries, provision of credit facilities and women-friendly technologies |
| 1994 | National Symposium on Women in Fisheries in Cambodia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Country resource paper on women in Cambodia developed, covering agriculture and fisheries • Recommended to organize a regional seminar on women in fisheries in the Indo-China countries |
| 1995 | Asian Level Workshop on Women in Asian Fisheries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background paper on women in Asian fisheries developed for presentation at the Beijing conference • The magazine, Aquaculture Asia, of NACA featured articles on women in fisheries |
| 1996 | Regional Seminar on Women in Fisheries in the Indo-China Countries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called for an urgent attention to gender issues in the fisheries sector • Suggested to form national networks in the region • Recommended to organize an international seminar on women in Asian fisheries in the upcoming Asian Fisheries Forum (AFF) |
| 1998 | International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized the role of women in aquaculture • Highlighted the need to sustain production from capture fisheries and women's roles in fisheries and aquaculture |
| 2001 | Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolution made to shift the focus from women in fisheries to gender and fisheries • Recommended to undertake more research to understand fisheries regulations, policies, and plans |
| 2003-2009 | Integrated Coastal Resource Management Project (ICRM) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported women's groups to create alternative livelihoods to increase income, achieve food security, and to reduce overfishing by diversifying the occupation |
| 2004 | Global Forum on Gender and Fisheries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommended to enhance the fisheries regulations, policies, and plans to embed gender and human dimensions in all fisheries activities |
| 2007-2010 | Fund on the Promotion of One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involved women's groups and the youth in the institutional set up of the fisher's groups |
| 2009-2013 | Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed gender mainstreaming strategy for the RFLP |
| 2010 | Workshop on Best Practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed tools for gender analysis in fisheries development projects and a field handbook on how to integrate gender aspects at various stages in the project cycle |
| 2011 | ASEAN-SEAFDEC Conference on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region towards 2010 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopted the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Resolution on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region towards 2020. The resolution asserted to strengthen the capacity of relevant stakeholders and harmonize the initiatives that support fisheries communities and governments, with a special focus on women and youth |
| 2014 | Thirty-first Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsed the voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication (SSF Guidelines) • Sought attention towards the need to secure rights and access to resources within the broader framework of human rights-based and gender equality approaches to small-scale fisheries development |
| 2015 | Southeast Asia Regional Consultation Workshop on the Implementation of SSF Guidelines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized on the implementation of SSF Guidelines and identification of implementation challenges |
| 2017 | Expert Workshop on Regional Approach for the Implementation of SSF Guidelines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarified the application of human rights-based and gender equality approaches and some concepts of SSF Guidelines and their implication in the context of small-scale fisheries governance and development in Southeast Asia |
| 2017 | Special Meeting of the SEAFDEC Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized the importance of small-scale fisheries, welfare of labor in fisheries, safety at sea, and gender equality in fisheries and aquaculture by adopting Resolution on the Future of SEAFDEC: Vision, Mission, and Strategies Towards 2030 |

women's groups in Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia to create alternative livelihood opportunities to increase their incomes, achieve food security, and to reduce overfishing by diversifying their occupations (Ruangsivakul *et al.*, 2011). ICRM also helped the women in its project sites to play active role in community-based savings and financing groups to have an easy access to microfinance for their new ventures (SEAFDEC, 2007).

Likewise, the One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP) project was implemented by SEAFDEC in 2007-2010, and funded by ASEAN Foundation through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund, with the objective of improving the livelihoods of fisheries communities in the ASEAN region. FOVOP took the initiative to involve women and youth in the institutional setup of the fishers' groups (Wongsanga and Sulit, 2010).

In June 2011, during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Conference on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region towards 2020, the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Member Countries adopted the Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region Towards 2020, which asserted towards strengthening the capacity of relevant stakeholders and harmonizing the initiatives that support fisheries communities and governments, with a special focus on women and youth. In 2014, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), were developed through a global, concerted effort and endorsed at the 31st Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI).

The SSF Guidelines took a wide-ranging perspective of small-scale fisheries livelihoods and draw attention to the need to secure rights and access to resources within the broader framework of human rights-based and gender equality approaches to small-scale fisheries development. This was followed by the Southeast Asian Regional Consultation Workshop on the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication, which was co-hosted by the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF) of the Government of Indonesia and FAO in collaboration with SEAFDEC and the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project in August 2015 in Bali, Indonesia. Considering the current challenges of implementation of SSF Guidelines, an Experts Workshop on Regional Approach for the Implementation of SSF Guidelines was convened in September 2017 in Bangkok, Thailand. Hosted by the SEAFDEC-Sweden Project, the Workshop helped to generate a great deal of dialogue among key stakeholders, donors, and regional and national organizations. One of the key outputs of the Workshop was a policy brief on Applying Human Rights-based and Gender Equality Approaches to Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia.

During the Special Meeting of SEAFDEC Council on 15 November 2017, the SEAFDEC Council of Directors also recognized the importance of small-scale fisheries, welfare of labor in fisheries, safety at sea, and gender equality in the fisheries and aquaculture by adopting the Resolution on the Future of SEAFDEC: Vision, Mission, and Strategies Towards 2030.

Way Forward

Gender issues in fisheries across Southeast Asia have been evolving since late 1980s, primarily highlighting on concerns related to women in aquaculture. Although the Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries Section (GAFS) of the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) was officially founded in January 2017, the AFS has been active in promoting the importance of gender dimension in fisheries and aquaculture early on. With the formation of GAFS, AFS became the first fisheries and/or aquaculture professional society to establish a section devoted to gender issues in fisheries and aquaculture.

The main paradigm shift happened during the Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries in 2001 in Taiwan with the well coordinated efforts from the AFS and WorldFish Center. During such Symposium, a resolution was made to shift the focus from women in fisheries to gender and fisheries with a view to addressing the issues more holistically. In addition, RFLP also shared the lessons learnt highlighting experiences from Southeast Asian countries and provided



a framework and approach for gender mainstreaming in the fisheries sector.

Though the female workforce, particularly in the small-scale fisheries sector is increasing, extensive research works with gender perspective covering issues like safety at work in fish value chains, technology and innovation, food and nutritional security, governance and rights, climate change, disasters and resilience, etc. are sporadically documented. For example, women in value chains are often considered as invisible instead of being active in a wide range of harvest and post-harvest activities both in capture fisheries and aquaculture. The State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture affirms that much more needs to be done to secure fair livelihoods for women in the fish value chains (FAO, 2016).

The need to mainstream gender into policies and programs across different food production systems is also gaining importance considering the gender specific contributions that can be made to ensure food and livelihood security across nations (The WorldFish Center, 2010). However, often times gender studies in relation to fisheries revolve around men's and women's access to and control over resources and the community perception about gender differentiated roles and responsibilities. Issues like gender in food security, nutrition, legal rights, labor and processing opportunities for fair livelihoods, and resilience in disasters are yet to be dealt with in depth particularly in the context of Southeast Asia.

A special issue of Asian Fisheries Science Journal, which comprises papers presented in the Sixth Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF6), suggested that there are primarily seven areas that have not received adequate attention in fisheries sector, *i.e.*, violence against women, fish processing, impacts of changes in resources and climate on women, linkages between fisheries, aquaculture and agriculture, household impacts of women's success in technology adoption, how to transform gender relationships and norms, and the effect of global processes on gender relations in the fisheries sectors (Williams *et al.*, 2006; Gopal *et al.*, 2016; Williams, 2017).

This missing gap offers an opportunity for relevant donors, stakeholders, and countries in the Southeast Asian region to include a diagnostic gender analysis in their fisheries research and development endeavors. Inclusion of such analysis will help generate evidence-based gender data to support targeted policy and development actions towards reducing gender gap while improving gender equity in fisheries

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