



Shining the Light on the 'Invisible' Woman in Fisheries Development

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The “invisible man” has long been a popular subject for TV shows and movies. Rarely however do we ‘see’ the invisible woman grace the big screen. If movie producers need role models they should look towards the fishing industry, where the significant contribution of women is often all but invisible. A new field handbook developed by the Spanish-funded Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) aims to shine a light on the contribution of women and by doing so help enhance the chances of success for development projects targeting small-scale fisheries. The Field Handbook was field-tested during the Workshop on Best Practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector conducted in Siem Reap, Cambodia from 2 to 5 November 2010, and organized by the RFLP and the Fisheries Administration of Cambodia with support from the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project (BOBLME).

The fisheries sector has long been considered a male domain. Such terms as ‘fishermen’ give the impression that the women do not fish, which is not always the case especially in the Southeast Asian region. As a matter of fact, more than 20% of fishers in Siem Reap, Cambodia are women, and in some areas of the country, women catch more fish than men (Kusakabe, 2008). She added that many factors continue to lead to the marginalization of women, which are brought about by the absence of gender issues in many national statistical reports. In Thailand for example, out of a number of research titles on socio-economics listed in the Annual Reports of the Department of Fisheries, not a single paper discussed gender issues.

In many countries in the region, women perform the major role as housekeepers without receiving any compensation. In spite of such functions, nowhere in the region are women considered heads of households while their husbands are alive. This is despite women continuing to play major roles in fish marketing and fish processing to earn income for their households. Nevertheless, the role of women in fisheries development in the Southeast Asian region gained much more acceptance in 2004 when one of the sessions of the Asian Fisheries Forum focused on Gender and Fisheries (Choo *et al.*, 2006).

Since 8 March 1975 when the International Women’s Day was declared, and every 8 March thereafter, International Women’s Day has been celebrated to remind the world of the need to enhance the recognition of the role of women

in development. The declaration of the International Women’s Day was followed by the proclamation by the United Nations of the Decade for Women (1976-1985). At the closing ceremonies of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1985, Secretary-General of the World Conference and former Philippine Senator, the Hon. Leticia R. Shahani emphasized that “the Decade has caused the invisible majority of humankind--the women--to be more visible on the global scene”.

Subsequently, many fora had been convened by international and regional organizations in order to devise strategies for further advancement and improvement of the status of women in development. These included those that discussed “gender and fisheries development”. However, in the present scenario within the fisheries sector, the major role of women in fisheries development is still not fully appreciated.

As a matter of fact, it has been noted that the other economic sectors such as agriculture and forestry appeared to be more advanced in mainstreaming gender in policy development than the fisheries sector (Williams *et al.*, 2006). It was during the Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries in 2004 in Penang, Malaysia, when the urgent need to understand how gender affects the operations of the fisheries sector including the actions and policies needed to bring changes for the empowerment of women was recognized. The Global Symposium suggested among others that, beyond research, fisheries regulations, policies and plans could be enhanced by embedding gender and other human dimensions (Choo *et al.*, 2006). This implies that overall, the fisheries sector needs to mainstream gender in all fisheries activities and support.

It is now widely accepted that the involvement and contribution of women in fisheries is far more significant than is often assumed. This is because women are estimated to comprise almost half of the labor force in small-scale capture fisheries-related activities. While men are typically involved in fishing from larger boats further from shore, women are heavily engaged in small-scale local fisheries, harvesting shellfish or seaweeds, repairing nets, processing fish products and marketing. These activities are carried out by the women in addition to running their households and looking after the children. Therefore, it has become imperative to consider the largely ‘invisible’ role of women in small-scale fisheries in order that relevant policies and development programs aimed at improving the livelihoods of small-scale fishers will be successful.

Comments on the significant role of women in fisheries development

“Women play a significant role in fisheries, yet lack of attention to gender can result in policies or programmes failing to improve livelihoods or reducing the vulnerability of fishing communities,” said Jose Parajua, Regional Manager of the RFLP (Box 1). He added that *“In many cases there is an incomplete understanding of the contribution of women and the complexity of gender roles in fishing communities. Gender issues should therefore be acknowledged in the design of development projects and fully integrated into project implementation”*.

Ignoring the complex relationships between women and men as both boat owners, processors and sellers, wives and husbands, community members and co-workers, may have negative impacts on the livelihoods of those involved. The need to understand the roles and contribution of women in small-scale fisheries communities has also never been greater.

“Women would previously support the men through inland fishing or other income generating activities. However, as marine resources are already depleted and catches fall, the role of women has changed as they no longer complement the men’s role but need to take on extra work to subsidize the men. It is therefore vital to understand the role of women in fisheries in view of the rapid changes that are taking place,” said Nireka Weeratunge from WorldFish Center, Penang, Malaysia.

“So much attention is paid to gender, however few people really have much idea about how it can be incorporated

Right: Mr. Jose Parajua, Regional Programme Manager, Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP); and **Below:** Ms. Angela Lentisco of RFLP presenting a gift to Kampong Pluk (Cambodia), Community Leader



Box 1. The Regional Fisheries Livelihood Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP)

The RFLP seeks to improve the livelihoods of fisherfolks and their families while fostering more sustainable fisheries resources management practices in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. The four-year (2009-2013), USD 19.55 million RFLP is funded by the Kingdom of Spain and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with national authorities in participating countries. For more information about the RFLP please see www.rflp.org or contact steve.needham@fao.org

into project planning,” said the RFLP’s Angela Lentisco. She added that *“When the RFLP began in late 2009 we started looking at ways to do this but realized there was very little information available. The usual approach seems to be simply ensuring that a certain number of women participate in training programs. We thought about making something that would help people understand gender and give practical guidance on how it can be integrated into development projects”*.

Field Handbook on Taking Gender into Account in Small-scale Fisheries Development Projects

In an effort to promote gender equity to improve fisheries livelihoods, the RFLP is developing a field handbook that provides guidance on how to incorporate gender into all phases of small-scale fisheries development projects. Government and field project staff, researchers as well as representatives of NGOs and international organizations from around the region met in the historic Cambodian City of Siem Reap on 2-5 November 2010 to discuss the contents of the handbook. During the workshop, the participants looked at the best practices for mainstreaming gender in the fisheries sector and also field tested the tools contained in the handbook.

The main objectives of the handbook are to introduce key gender concepts while providing practical tools to help integrate gender into various stages of the project cycle. Such tools include an activity analysis which helps map the activities of men and women in their daily lives; an analysis of the access by men and women to resources and benefits (e.g. cash/income, boats, markets, information, community groups); and an analysis on gender needs (e.g. access to training, credit, education, clean water, among others). The handbook is designed in a user friendly manner and can be used by project managers, field officers, especially those who are always in contact with communities or any other persons involved in designing projects or initiatives.

“The main mistake is not being able to understand the real needs of people. We have to avoid the idea that just by working with women everything is okay. You cannot

just separate women as a different stakeholder group and expect them to become involved in various activities. This increases their burden as it fails to take into account other commitments, such as household work or supporting the men. It is necessary to have a really good understanding of needs of women and expectations from the outset. This is where the handbook will play a valuable role,” said Carmen Arenas, a gender consultant who worked with RFLP to create the Field Handbook.

The participants at the workshop had the chance to test the tools in the handbook at a number of fishing communities around Cambodia’s famous Tonle Sap Lake. For the participants, the field testing was a valuable experience as it revealed the considerable contribution of women in the communities. “Many women said they went fishing with their husbands but were only helping and did not define their contribution as work. They did not valorize what they did. Women also fetched water by hand while the men would only do so if they could use a motorcycle. Yet the preconception exists that only men could pull up the nets and so the men’s contribution was recognized while the women’s efforts were not,” said Angela Lentisco.

Members of the fishing communities also enjoyed the field testing. “The listing of resources was important as it shows how many roles women actually take part in,” said Mrs. Sang Ran who is a member of the Commune Council at Kampong Pluk. “This is good as we want to stress that women can lead. Before I just stayed at home, but now I can lead,” she added. However, at the same time the field visits also made clear how complex gender roles are and that accurately assessing them is not an easy task. “The concept of gender really comes from Western society and it can be hard for communities to understand the divisions between men and women. Local societies or communities often simply see things differently... it’s just the family,” Angela Lentisco stressed.

Considerable feedback on the handbook was generated during the workshop which will be incorporated into the



Field testing of the Gender Field Handbook with the female members of a community near Tonle Sap, Cambodia

final version. “This event has been very useful,” said Mr. Rattana from the Spanish NGO Paz y Desarrollo. “I have been involved with gender for some time but never in fisheries and it had been useful for me to have an idea of the importance of gender in this area. NGOs do a lot but it is harder for the government to address gender issues because we all need more experience on how to apply this in practice”.

Meanwhile, Jessica Muñoz from the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources stressed the importance of patience. “There is still a macho population in the Philippines and you need to take it easy. Initially men in my country did not want to hear and you cannot ram gender down their throats or force the issue. The handbook will be of great help. It is not strictly bookish, as it is nicely presented and arouses interest” she declared.



As in many countries in Southeast Asia, the main role of women in fisheries in the Philippines is in processing and marketing



Recommendations and Ways Forward

During the November 2010 Workshop on Best Practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector, considerable discussions took place on the various approaches to mainstreaming gender and the merits of the logical framework approach covered in the Field Handbook. The need to thoroughly understand the complexity of communities before undertaking any gender analysis and the ability to adapt the tools to each and every context as well as the need for continual feedback were therefore stressed during the workshop.

“The handbook can always be improved but only if people use it and help refine it. The objective is to provide simple advice and tools that help make the work of women more visible and to help project planners and managers to consider the impact of any development activities on the women,” said Angela Lentisco.

“There is a global consensus on the importance of addressing gender in development. However when it comes

to field project design and implementation, there are no specific recommendations on how to do so especially in the context of small-scale fisheries. I am confident that this handbook will make an important contribution to help ensure that gender concerns are explicitly recognized and addressed in project activities,” added Mr. Ajay Markanday, FAO Representative in Cambodia.

“I can use this in my country and it will be helpful as it is simple enough to understand and can be used in the communities,” announced Ms. Elfrina Ly da Cruz, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Gender Division of the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality of Timor-Leste.

Best Practices for Mainstreaming Gender into Small-scale Fisheries Policies

The November 2010 Workshop on Best Practices for Gender Mainstreaming in the Fisheries Sector came up with the best practices for mainstreaming gender into small-scale fisheries

Box 2. Best practices for mainstreaming gender into small-scale fisheries

- Ensure that both the reproductive and productive roles of women are considered
- It is important to have a solid contextual understanding of local culture, norms, economic and other social status
- It is important to have good statistics as well as in-depth qualitative data
- Projects and programs should be participatory and flexible/reactive rather than prescriptive owing to the complexity of gender issues
- The poor should be central to any actions and it is important to ensure that women and men, boys and girls are fully involved/considered in the design, development, implementation, and monitoring of interventions as well as in assessing and prioritizing livelihoods interventions
- The importance of self help groups, associations and networks should be recognized as should the leadership roles of women
- Activities should be targeted at both women and men, but if they only focus on women or men then there must be clear reasons why?
- Equitable access to resources and decision making spaces, need to be ensured
- Women need to be better informed through improved access to communication and information, while the women’s own knowledge, experiences and aspirations should be acknowledged
- The issue of gender needs to be communicated more broadly, while such gender issues should be more accessible, relevant, palatable and punchy (without losing their real meaning)



Children in a fishing community in Timor-Leste: What does the future hold for them?



Cleaning the catch in Sri Lanka

policies (**Box 2**). Fisheries managers and policy makers can refer to these best practices as guide during the formulation of policies to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed into the plans and programs that aim to attain sustainable development of small-scale fisheries.

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Field testing of the Gender Field Handbook in a community near Tonle Sap, Cambodia

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For more information on the ‘Mainstreaming gender into project cycle management in the fishery sector field manual’ or to register interest in receiving a copy please contact angela.lentisco@fao.org