

Women's struggles in fisheries: What have we gained?

This article, a reflection on the last decade and a half of women's struggles in fisheries, argues that much needs to be done to move from tokenism to substantive gains

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In the last 15 years since the launch of the Women in Fisheries Programme in the ICSF, much has happened. In several parts of the world, women in fisheries have come together, created networks, intervened in fishworker organizations and tried to spell out a feminist agenda for the future development of fisheries. What have we achieved? While I feel reluctant to make broad generalizations, some loud thinking might perhaps stimulate discussion.

Women in fisheries now find a place in conference agendas; as a separate topic of course, isolated from the main agenda of such



programmes. Generally speaking, and more so in India, research on women in fisheries is mainly in terms of gathering disaggregated gender data. The conceptual framework, however, remains confined to 'participation' and 'empowerment' with 'gender' appearing typically as an apolitical concept, a new variable. Unfortunately, the framework of patriarchy is rarely applied and hence dynamic inter-relationships do not get addressed.

Internationally, as scholarship in women in fisheries has increased, attempts have been made to involve women subjects in research processes and analyses. While this is an empowering methodology and has encouraged women to

voice their opinions in broader forums with policy makers, the overarching framework of planning, management, budgeting and trade practices in fisheries remains within the male domain.

At the level of fishworker organizations, there have been interesting developments. Women have certainly begun to organize as wives of fishers or as women in communities or as fishworkers themselves. Peche et Development reports that there are now several women who head the Comite Locale organizations in France; for the main part, male-dominated structures. In some countries, women have also received recognition for contributing to social security as members of the fishing family enterprise. In Chile, a woman working as a diver's assistant has been elected the president of the large national fishworker's organization: CONAPACH. The constitutions of recently created fishworker organizations, like the World Forum of Fishworkers and Fish Harvesters (WFF) and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), make room for 50 per cent representation of women. In several Asian countries women are directly admitted as members of fishworker's organizations. In India, the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) has opened itself to membership by women workers' federations today. However, it is now up to the women to strategize and influence the broader agenda.

Women in fisheries have gained by organizing themselves for their rights. In Spain for example, women mussel gatherers managed to get access to inter-tidal resources and support for entrepreneurship. In several parts of the world, women have fought for space in markets to sell fish, for access to credit, for the right to travel on public transport, for recognition as workers in government welfare boards, and so on.

The efforts of the Community-based Coastal Resources Management Resource Centre (CBCRM-RC) in the Philippines resulted in women's involvement in fisheries management sometimes as chairpersons of the management committees but more often in unpaid labour surveillance tasks that really should have been done by the State. In the guise of decentralization, the State continues to abdicate its responsibilities, transferring the burden onto communities.

Sensitive men in fisher's organizations, while trying to articulate a non-patriarchal management perspective, come up against a wall because of the larger context of fisheries—a context limited to fish that ignores the sustainability of communities. This came up particularly starkly in a study we had undertaken on the impact of development on coastal populations and the environment in India.

The study found that though the fishery was booming throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was no improvement in the condition of women in the community. Morbidity levels among women remained high; children of school-going age were not in schools; the female child sex ratio was on the decline and dowry demands for marrying a girl had risen phenomenally. At the same time, access to potable water and proper sanitation was very poor thereby increasing the burden on women. Also, with increasing capital costs and falling catches per unit effort, the fisheries were on the decline. So, not only was the development agenda not focused on women, it had, with high subsidies from the state, also ruined the fisheries. Moreover, access to fish both as food and for vending, that is, for both life and livelihood, was greatly compromised as more fish went to the export market. Women's work in fisheries was thus under constant threat.

The 2007 ILO Work in Fishing Convention, was also most disappointing as shore-based workers, for the most part women, were totally bypassed in the conceptualization of the Convention and, therefore, in its provisions. Why did the worker's organizations that sat in at the tripartite debates not insist on a woman-inclusive conceptualization of work in fishing despite the overwhelming representation of women in artisanal fisheries?

So, in the last decade, though the concept of 'gender' and the issues that affect women have received increased visibility, this has been more in an apolitical rather than in a substantive sense.

On the whole, the developments in fisheries are against life and livelihood. As the demand for fish keeps on increasing, aquaculture is being aggressively promoted. In the case of marine and brackish water culture, coastal communities are reacting against the pollution of their waters and the destruction of coastal lands. The unbridled demand for fish is at the heart of the plunder of resources. The complex nature of the struggle transcends the fisheries and the fishing communities and raises urgent questions about global lifestyles and increasing social inequity. The struggle may seem complex and unending but we should not give up. ❏

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