

# Women as fishers: Issues and struggles

**This article outlines the threats facing artisanal fisherwomen in the Philippines and their struggles to foreground gender issues**

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In the Philippines, the fisheries sector comprises four sub-sectors: municipal (capture) fisheries, commercial (capture) fisheries, aquaculture and fish processing. The majority of women and men for whom fisheries is a source of livelihood are found in the municipal fisheries sub-sector.

Municipal fisheries refer to coastal fishing activities by means of traditional and simple fishing tools, primarily for subsistence. As such, it is similar to artisanal fisheries but would also include aquaculture workers and small-scale aquaculture producers.



Women in Philippine's coastal communities participate not only in fishing but also in pre-fishing and post-fishing activities and should, therefore, be recognized as artisanal fishers. For example, most women help their fishermen husbands prepare or repair fishing gear. After the fish is caught, women are usually the ones who sell it in the local markets, drying or smoking what is left unsold. Women also take up small-scale seaweed farming and oyster farming. While the majority of women are not active fishers, in parts of Cebu and other Visayan islands, women do go out to sea with their husbands to help with fishing.

Today, the fisheries sector in the Philippines is facing a worsening crisis related to issues of ownership and control of coastal resources. The

primary issue is the open-access regime under which big players—investors in the commercial fisheries and aquaculture sub-sectors—taking advantage of the weak enforcement of fishery laws and the lack of aquaculture regulations, have come to own or control coastal resources.

Commercial fishing operators have overfished most nearshore fishing grounds while aquaculture operators have gained control of shore and foreshore areas, destroying large tracts of mangrove forests to make way for fishpond development. In the process, they have displaced artisanal fishers, many of them women, from their traditional gleaning and fishing grounds.

Another issue is the threat of increasing liberalization of fisheries trade worldwide. Tariffs have been reduced to minimum levels to increase market access for fishery products, without regard to effective fisheries and aquaculture management. In fact, reduced shrimp tariffs in markets in Japan and other developed countries have provided an incentive for the Arroyo government and local investors to promote the farming of the exotic Pacific white shrimp. But this is being done without a parallel effort to establish effective aquaculture regulations and standards to mitigate the related social and environmental costs.

Perhaps the biggest threat to coastal fisheries and to fisherfolk communities is the alarming privatization of foreshore areas, areas supposedly inalienable under the Philippine Constitution. Investors are now engaged in massive conversion and reclamation of foreshore areas, building permanent structures, not only wharfs and jetties but also hotels, shopping malls and factories, where mangroves formerly stood. Bulacan's "Aqua City" and the Masinloc Coastal Economic Zone are just two examples.

Fisherwomen in general face multiple burdens. Besides looking after domestic chores and children's wellbeing, they supplement their husband's fish catch and add to the family's daily food by gleaning for fish in mangrove areas. The conversion of mangrove areas to aquaculture has meant less food on the family table. A woman fisher, thus, experiences more acutely the impact of economic dislocation and resource degradation caused by commercial aquaculture.

Some fisherwomen have been absorbed as labourers in aquaculture. Typically, in this case, a woman would help her husband, the fishpond caretaker. While the husband would receive a small share of the profit at the end of a

production cycle spanning several months, the woman's labour would remain unpaid. In a few coastal areas, there are small-scale fish farms providing subsistence for fishing families. In such cases, the woman and her husband work as co-producers and the meagre profits are regarded as family income to be managed by the woman.

However, as mentioned, the biggest threat in recent years has been the convergence of commercial and industrial investments in coastal areas, uprooting and dislocating fishing communities. This new form of "development aggression"—as it is now known—adds to the burden of fisherwomen who must help their families cope with the impact of dislocation.

In 2002, the Kilusang Mangingisda (Fisherfolk Movement) was formed to address the worsening crisis in fisheries. A coalition of 14 national and sub-national fisherfolk organizations, Kilusang Mangingisda (KM) seeks greater equity in property arrangements, participatory and accountable governance and the responsible use of fishery resources. Although KM is mainly engaged in advocacy campaigns, it also carries out research on fisheries.

From the start, women have been active participants in KM and its member federations. An initial question was whether a separate women's group was necessary to address gender-specific issues. The women finally decided to remain in KM, but banded together to form a committee called Kababaihan sa Kilusang Mangingisda (Women in the Fisherfolk Movement).

Kababaihan sa Kilusang Mangingisda (KKM) was formed around the same time that the Banilad Declaration came out in September 2003. This declaration outlined KM's views on the Philippine fisheries situation and the threats facing artisanal fisheries.

One of KM's major campaigns was a 1,000 km-long caravan campaign to highlight the fishing community's opposition to the government's aquaculture programme—Aquaculture for Rural Development (ARD)—and other forms of development aggression in coastal areas. The caravan passed through fisheries and aquaculture producing provinces in Luzon Island, from north to south, stopping in every major coastal community to educate local artisanal fishers about the adverse impacts of commercial and industrial investments in coastal areas. A woman from KKM was present at every meeting to discuss the gender-specific impacts of development aggression.

This campaign was followed by direct action, in which women from KKM also participated, involving the dismantling of fish cages constructed illegally outside designated zones.

The fisherfolk coalition also campaigned actively on the issues of trade and subsidy. At the national level, KM launched a countrywide conference of artisanal fishers in May 2005 to discuss the impacts of fisheries trade liberalization in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and that of fisheries subsidies on the sustainability of artisanal fisheries. The conference provided a forum for Philippine's artisanal fishers to develop a position supporting 'sustainable fisheries and trade'. KKM provided the gender-specific dimensions to this position.

At the regional level, KM engaged with other artisanal fisher organizations in the Southeast Asia Fish for Justice (SEAFish) network, a regional advocacy network of fisherfolk organizations from countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. At a conference in Jakarta in September 2005, SEAFish members formulated a common position on fisheries trade and subsidies, which was subsequently called the Jakarta Declaration.

The Jakarta Declaration called for the differential treatment of artisanal fisheries with respect to tariff elimination. It argued that public investments (or subsidies) are necessary for the sustainable development of artisanal fisheries. However, it called for the elimination of most subsidies in developed fishing nations on the grounds that these create trade distortions and lead to overcapacity and overfishing.

The SEAFish position set forth in the Jakarta Declaration was taken forward by member organizations in their respective countries. During the WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December 2005, SEAFish members made a presentation before WTO officials. They also conducted a fluvial parade in Hong Kong to dramatize the plight of artisanal fisheries under the WTO regime.

International activities go hand in hand with local ones. Lobbying with governments is necessary at both the local and national level for accessing funds allocated for gender and development programmes, for social services, for the resettlement of displaced fisherfolk and for fish processing and marketing activities.

KKM has succeeded in bringing gender issues to the fore within the KM coalition. At the village level, it conducts awareness-raising among women on fisheries. It also tries to expand the ranks of organized women. Fisherwomen are made aware that they are capable not only of domestic chores, but also of work in the economic and social spheres.

The assertion of rights of the individual woman begins at the village level. Women's organizations have, therefore, been formed in villages and these provide much-needed support to individual fisherwomen. ❏

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