

Recognizing women in fisheries: Policy considerations for developing countries

Greater cross-sectoral policy dialogue, advocacy and information exchange is needed to build more comprehensive and gender-just fisheries policy

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Gender issues in national development are cross-cutting and multi-dimensional, impinging on the activities and performance of several sectors simultaneously. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action are key instruments that provide the basis for law and policy to address gender-specific issues across the sectors, whether fisheries, agriculture or manufacturing.



Are the provisions from these instruments, such as those relating to non-discrimination by sex, equal access to resources and opportunities for women and special attention to women in rural and industrial fisheries, reflected in our fisheries policies or their implementation? Do they influence other legal and regulatory regimes?

What are the major drivers for fisheries policies and why are gender issues in the sector yet to be adequately recognized? First and foremost, very few developing countries

have a comprehensive national fisheries policy. Consequently, the overarching national policy framework for fisheries management and development is usually derived from development strategies and legislation on fisheries and maritime matters. The legislative framework often provides general provisions on fisheries access, fisheries management, enforcement and monitoring, which are strongly influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The emphasis is on regulation rather than on policy implementation.

As a result, specific principles and goals supporting sustainable fisheries and wider community interests, including the integration of gender issues, are either limited or non-existent. Furthermore, development strategies are focused on the market-driven and export-oriented commercial development of the fisheries sector, with the aim of increasing production and contributing to foreign exchange earnings, while creating employment. The concerns are often related to access to investment capital, development of joint-ventures, improving products for competitive markets, and technological upgrades for cost reduction or increased production. Such strategies are dependent on skilled labour and entrepreneurship, which most women lack. Therefore, in the industrial fisheries sector, despite policies aimed at creating employment, women's labour continues to be marginalized.

Global concern over the sustainability of fisheries resources, and their continued ability to support the livelihood of coastal communities, was highlighted during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). One of the outcomes of the UNCED process was the development of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and other related FAO fisheries instruments. There has subsequently been a major shift in policy focus towards conservation, protection of critical habitats, reduction in fishing

capacity and an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. This policy shift requires greater reliance on decentralized fisheries management, either through community-based approaches or, in the case of shared and straddling stocks, through the establishment of regional fisheries management organizations.

So far there has been very limited research on the gender implications of such policies. What is apparent is that the emphasis is on limiting access to fisheries resources through creating various types of rights-based fisheries, use of more selective gear and technology, and greater reporting requirements, all of which are likely to have differential impacts on men's and women's fishing activities.

Labour laws in the fisheries sector have been notoriously inadequate for both men and women. Given the legal formalities involved, the new ILO Fishing Convention which was adopted in June 2007 will take some time to come into effect. At the same time, the focus of the Convention is limited to the safety and protection of fisher's rights on fishing vessels. This does not cover the women in supporting shore-based activities or address social problems associated with seafarers in the port or with their families. With the globalization of fisheries, anecdotal information already indicates an increase in a wide range of social problems in fishing ports, and with communities heavily reliant on fishers' remittances from work on foreign vessels. These social problems are not directly addressed within the context of national fisheries policies but seen as implementation hurdles by the Fisheries Administration, and considered beyond their scope.

Instruments such as trade agreements under the World Trade Organization (WTO) and social considerations, such as under CEDAW, are also seen as indirect instruments of fisheries policy. These instruments are often administered by different government agencies. These may also be at different levels of the government structure and, therefore, may have different priorities and budgets and may not necessarily complement the agenda of the fisheries administration. For example, the responsibility for achieving gender policy goals are often with the Women's Department or Bureau which may be at a 'lower level' as an implementing agency, rather than as a policy-making agency. As a result, there is always the risk of a lack of congruency between gender policies of different government agencies.

Much of grassroots and community level work, as well as initiatives at the regional level, are being driven by NGO and civil society groups, concerned with the environment and with equitable social and economic development. A number of such initiatives aim to protect biodiversity or adapt to climate change. Implementation strategies, in line with the Biodiversity and Climate Change Conventions, include the creation of MPAs and the diversification of livelihoods, thereby indirectly addressing poverty and fisheries issues.

At the national level this work generally falls under the umbrella of the Environment Administration as the lead agency. In the case of community-focused projects, several factors that determine the extent to which women's concerns and interests are integrated come into play. These may include *inter alia* the type of social structure, cultural norms and practices, the type of NGO group, funding agency priorities, community leadership, status of fisheries resources, availability of alternative sources of income and the level of gender awareness amongst stakeholders. Where there are effective resource management systems and environmental consciousness is high, there is likely to be greater recognition of women's direct and indirect role, and a consideration of the impact of initiatives undertaken on them.

Therefore, if one looks at the status of women in the fisheries sector, their rights and access to resources and opportunities, one can say that while some progress has been made in areas of aquaculture, post-harvest and marketing, a lot more work is still needed to mainstream gender issues into the fisheries sector. Given the complex policy environment of the fisheries sector, integrating gender issues into policy implementation requires greater cross-sectoral stakeholder platforms for policy dialogue, advocacy and information exchange, so that a more comprehensive and socially-acceptable fisheries policy could be formulated. A co-ordinated approach is, therefore, necessary from the highest policy level, not only to achieve sustainable fisheries but also to meet the social and economic objectives of the sector. Gender analysis of various fisheries policies is an essential first step that can facilitate and better inform this decision-making process. ■