



25 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

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ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

The 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3), held earlier this year in Shanghai, revealed worrying facts about women in the fisheries. Women are still invisible and marginal in the sector. They may have growing access to microcredit but continue to own little or no property. If a woman has a top job in a fisheries institution, her case would be the exception to the general rule that clusters jobs for women at the bottom of formal hierarchies. Clearly, despite years of struggle and advocacy, women in the fisheries continue to be denied their basic right to equality and justice.

Gender, the key theme of the GAF3 symposium, is today widely recognized as one of the most powerful tools of discrimination and exclusion in the fisheries. Less well understood are the factors responsible for creating, maintaining and reproducing gender in society. The understanding of gender is often limited to the power differential that exists between men and women. Gender, according to this view, exists as a sort of gap between the sexes. To make the leap across this gap, women, it is believed, need a set of skills and tools, accessible through gender empowerment training, mainstreaming techniques, access to microcredit, and so on. This approach has been pursued for many years in the development sector but evidence seems to suggest that for the majority of women in the fisheries, the gap is certainly not shrinking.

Gender is of course more than just a gap and certainly more than just about men and women. After years of sharing experiences, of research and documentation, we are aware that gender exists as a patriarchal power relation in every institution, private and public, collaborating in complex ways with existing sources of power, be it the power of money, religion, caste, race or sexuality. It would be impossible to challenge gender without fundamentally challenging the sources of power that strengthen it. However, paradoxically, the predominant approach continues to be to assume that gender can simply be mainstreamed into existing institutions—a view that has been particularly useful in aiding capitalist growth in the fisheries, as well as in other sectors, and recruiting the cheap labour of women in a period of rapid globalization.

Simplistic views of gender and gender mainstreaming to solve problems of systemic inequality often lead to the co-option of women into existing class, and patriarchal power privileges. We see this happening in all forms of purely identity-based struggles for equality that failed to address the fundamental bases for power and oppression. It is very important to acknowledge all forms of power and discard exclusive identity-based politics for more inclusive struggles for equity.

There is a growing realization today that gender must be understood in a fuller, more substantive sense. A significant suggestion made during the GAF3 symposium was that every source of power—social, cultural, domestic—must be thoroughly examined to make sense of the lives of women and communities in the fisheries. If we are indeed serious about addressing the discrimination women face, it is time to revisit the question of gender, to subject closely-held assumptions to fresh scrutiny, to pause, to review, take stock and plan for timely and effective intervention. ■



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