

# Turning the Tide (Part 1)

**This is the first part of the summary of a paper that explores the key developments and trends that can be identified in the literature on women in the fisheries in the last three decades. The next issue of *Yemaya* will carry the concluding section**

By **Nilanjana Biswas**  
(nilanjanabiswas@  
yahoo.com),  
independent  
researcher and writer

Of the 43.5 million people around the world directly employed in fishing and aquaculture, ninety per cent are small-scale fishers. The majority (eighty six per cent) live in Asia; most under conditions of great poverty. For every person directly employed in fishing or fish farming, it is estimated that four others are employed in post- or pre-harvest work. Most countries however do not consider the work that these four others do—work such as fish processing and selling, transportation, net and gear making, boat building, fuel supply, engine repair—to be productive or contributing to the national economy. Thus, in 2010, the labour of about 174 million people across the world remained largely invisible in fishery statistics and was either unpaid or insufficiently paid for. Women made up the bulk of this figure. Since the numbers dependent on fishing for a livelihood is increasing every year, the numbers of women whose labour is freely exploited can be said to be proportionately soaring. This is ironic given that never before has the question of women in the fisheries been more visible than it has in the recent past.

In the last few decades, research on women in the fisheries has uncovered the astounding

amounts of work that women in the sector perform. The growing research focus on women's lives and livelihoods in the fisheries has been matched by a growing demand for the inclusion of gender in fisheries policy, leading to even more research on gender. In 2010, ICSF commissioned a study to analyze the key points of this research. The aim of the study was to draw out from this body of work certain trends and lessons for discussion so that stronger and more sustainable forms of intervention might be developed. A summary of the paper is being carried in *Yemaya* in two parts: the first part in this issue and the second in the next. The full version of the paper is available for download at: [icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/publications/occpaper/pdf/english/issue\\_112/ALL.pdf](http://icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/publications/occpaper/pdf/english/issue_112/ALL.pdf)

An analysis of the key research on women in the fisheries done in the past three decades reveals a set of five developments. First, if thirty years ago the analysis of women's labour was the focus of research, today it is not so much labour but survival and livelihood, embedded in a framework not of labour analysis but of ecology that is the object of research analysis. Second, the idea of women's empowerment has gained superiority over the idea of women's exploitation and oppression. Third, rights-based approaches are becoming increasingly common. Fourth, community-based forms of management of natural resources are being advocated. Finally, both for fishery activities as well as for research and action in the fishing sector, there is a growing dependence on multi-donor aid—aid which brings with it the ideology of liberalization and free market as a single prescription for all. Before we turn to each of these key developments, a few words of clarification by way of context are necessary. Although these appear to be distinct developments, they have in fact evolved not in isolation but in deeply related ways, and must, therefore, be read and analyzed together.

Of particular significance is the last point, the growing dominance of development aid, which has played a key role in manufacturing a global, consensual and uniform discourse on development, and strongly shaped the rest of the developments outlined above. The period of the last three decades in which this set of developments occurred was marked by two significant milestones in the history of development aid. The late 1980s saw the

ICSF



Women vendors waiting for the catch on the shore in Gambia. Women's work in fish processing and selling are often not considered to be work

crafting of the Washington Consensus while in 2005, the Paris Declaration was drafted. Shaped by the most developed countries of the world, led by the United States of America (USA), these, very simply, set the agenda for global economic development. The main agenda of the Washington Consensus thirty years ago was economic growth, to be achieved through neoliberal economic reforms. In the more recent Paris Declaration, the priority was no longer growth but 'good governance'.

Since the late 1980s, international money-lending institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) attached the recommendations of the Washington Consensus as core-loan conditionalities for every poverty-stricken country of the developing world seeking aid. The financial and policy impacts of this forced economic restructuring were felt across every sector. In the case of the fisheries, this intensified an export-led growth boom and led to the deregulation of international trade and cross-border investment. As the new millennium dawned, the economic restructuring of the global South, accelerated by the Washington Consensus, was more or less complete. Capitalist reforms were largely in place in all poor countries. It now became critical for industry to reshuffle its priorities in order to consolidate its hold over newly emerging market economies. In the last ten years or so, industry has, therefore, pushed for two things: one, in order that norms related to environment, labour and so on are harmonized with the interests of industry, it has pushed for the privatization of regulation, and two, in order that people ruined by the reforms don't actually die of starvation and disease, it has pushed for the specific targeting of aid to the most impoverished. The success of both these programmes—privatization and targeted aid—depends on efficient management and delivery systems. For these reasons, the capitalist agenda has now shifted to 'good governance', and, so, 'harmonization' of aid with national goals are the focus of the Paris Declaration of 2005. With this context in mind, we turn to the key developments that mark the literature on women in the fisheries.

The first noticeable development is the move away from the political economy (or analysis based on political and economic understanding) of women's labour. This was the focus of much of the early literature on women in the fisheries, the result of a critique of the Left which had consistently disregarded the economic value of the work women did. Although clearly the fishing economy would collapse if the fish that is caught is not processed and sold, if families

are not fed and clothed, or if fishermen are not freed from the pressures of household work to go to sea, only one type of labour (the act of fishing) is economically valued while the other (everything else) is either under-valued (and under-paid) or not valued at all (and unpaid). To explain why this is the case, the early studies turned to ways in which patriarchal power relations were institutionalized in society. This included the sexual division of labour, which was found to provide biological justifications for patriarchal practices in fishing economies. It also included the split both between the public (outside the household) and the private (in the household) sphere and between the spheres of production and reproduction. In the private sphere of the fishing economy, that is, in the domestic or household domain, poor women, who formed the bulk of the small-scale fisheries, put in unimaginable number of hours, working until they were ready to collapse. This work (for example, cleaning and drying fish, mending nets, cooking for the family) was considered to be economically valueless and remained unwaged. Productive or waged work (for example, the selling of fish) took place, it was thought, in the public, productive sphere.

The public-private separation ensured that a certain type of labour, typically the labour of women but also that of children, migrants and so on, would provide hidden benefits and subsidies to the dominant economy. The extraction of subsidy occurred at three levels. One, women, in accordance with the sexual division of labour, routinely put in unpaid labour into essential tasks without which active fishing could not be sustained. They thus heavily subsidized the small-scale fisheries and helped maintain the "resilience of small-scale fishing communities". Two, in poor countries, women's labour also subsidized the State by absorbing the costs of reproducing the fishing family (day-care for children, cooking for the household, care of the sick and elderly, etc.) into the private sphere of the family and the community, thus allowing the State to abandon its social responsibilities towards the working poor. Three, the cheaply available labour of women directly subsidized industrial or capitalist fisheries by keeping wage levels in factories and production sites low. For instance, the fish processing industry in the global South with its insistence on 'labour market flexibility', relies largely on a female workforce, which means poor wages, poor working conditions, non-permanent work and zero unionization.

The political economy framework of analysis is significant today in the context of the global South where industry is strengthening itself through exploiting highly vulnerable forms of feminized labour. However, the framework had its blind spots and

**For the bulk of the women in the small-scale fisheries, whose labour power is possibly their sole asset, giving up the political and economic understanding of women's labour represented an immense and unjustifiable loss of focus.**



Women at the dryfish market at Nakkappalli, Andhra Pradesh, India.  
Prevailing structures of power in the fishing community tend to impose patriarchy

shortcomings. It lacked an ecological dimension at a time when fish resources were clearly dwindling. Further, it did not see the problems of technology which it often viewed as a liberating force. Over the years, the livelihood struggles of poor women in the South against deforestation, coastal commercialization, industrial agriculture and commercial seeds brought questions of ecological sustainability to the forefront, forcing new frameworks of analysis to emerge. These rightly focused attention on the declining natural resource base and questioned production and consumption relations from the point of view of sustainability. However, as the focus shifted from labour to environment, the newly emerging ecological frameworks such as eco-feminism were often marked by a growing “biological essentialism” with respect to gender, which equated women with nature and sustenance and men with culture and aggression. If political economy frameworks failed to address the ecological dimension adequately, political ecology frameworks failed in equal measure to address the question of labour, particularly women’s labour, within the household and local markets as well as in the factories and fish processing plants. For the bulk of the women in the small-scale fisheries, whose labour power is possibly their sole asset, this represented an immense and unjustifiable loss of focus.

The second development is that over the last few decades, the ideas of women’s oppression and exploitation have given way to the notion of women’s empowerment. The idea of women’s oppression was tied to the understanding of patriarchy, a term used by women’s movements in many poor countries to refer to a system of power relations that controlled women’s labour, fertility and

sexuality in different ways to serve institutions both in the private domain (such as the family or the community) and in the public domain (such as the workplace or the media). The notion of women’s exploitation was tied to an understanding of the specific ways in which women’s labour was stolen by capital. An analysis of patriarchy made it clear that keeping women out of decision-making was no accidental oversight but rather a strategy that, say, the *cofradía*, the caste *panchayat* or the modern trade union used to control power and perpetuate the status quo. Because the prevailing structures of power in the traditional fishing community and family gain material benefits from women’s unpaid and under-paid labour, they all tend to impose patriarchal boundaries on women’s lives, using violence, if needed, to guard these boundaries. The hidden and devalued nature of women’s domestic labour serves to devalue women in the marketplace when they seek employment. The early studies demonstrated how the industrial fisheries exploited patriarchal practices to acquire cheap labour.

For many reasons, however, the idea of women’s exploitation and oppression soon began to be discredited globally. One reason was that it too strongly accused the capitalist class, together with patriarchy and other structures of power, for the subordination of women, and had, therefore, to be silenced. Another reason was that in the period of the Washington Consensus, capitalist opportunities inherent in integrating women into development began to be recognized. To get women into development, that is to say, to mobilize cheap labour for capitalist growth became the main concern. By 1979, the United Nations had adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which promised equal opportunities for women. While this promise of equality was good news for women of the upper classes who had access to education or some investment capital, for the vast majority of women who were poor, to expect equality within capitalism, a system that thrived on subsidies gained from women’s exploitation, was no more than a cruel joke. But this was a period of Bank/Fund-led structural adjustment policies, which forced borrowing countries to privatize basic services like water, health, education and electricity, to open up their markets, to dilute, if not remove, any existing labour, environmental and coastal regulation that stood in the way of industry, and to follow export-led models of economic growth. As traditional livelihoods soon began to get wiped out, poor women, frantic for a means of survival, joined waged work in unprecedented numbers.

It was not just by coincidence that the term “gender empowerment” gained currency in this period. Empowerment after all was an ideological permit for the assimilation of women as cheap labour into capitalism. Another term that was quickly and widely embraced was “gender mainstreaming”. Popularized by the 1995 Beijing Conference, the political implications of this term were clear: capitalism, race, caste, religion and other structures of power were not the problem for women and did not need to be challenged so long as gender could somehow be “mainstreamed” into them, that is, as long as women could also become beneficiaries of these divisions in society. Since, in this period, ecological viewpoints also gained wide acceptance, “earth mother myths” about women’s instinctive closeness to nature became very popular. This kind of thinking provided a convenient justification for enlisting the unpaid or underpaid labour of women into state-run forestry and coastal conservation programmes. The issue of “gender” (a term

that lacks any sort of consistent definition in the fisheries literature) soon became all about providing “opportunities” such as empowerment training, skills training, microcredit, and so on, taking attention away from the need to hack at the structural and political roots of the problem. The spread of this particular interpretation of gender (as a matter of consensus and assimilation rather than of struggle and resistance) was institutionalized by state policy and propped up by donor aid. A class of professional “gender experts” sprang up across the world, embedded in a wide array of state, non-state and global bodies—the World Bank, the United Nations and its affiliates, national development agencies, governments, business firms, multinational companies and non-governmental organizations. This emerging collaboration was critical for the global expansion of capital in the last three decades.

(The second and concluding part of this article will be carried in the next issue of *Yemaya*) ❏