Turning the Tide (Part 2)

This is the second part of the summary of a paper that explores the key developments and trends that can be identified in the literature on women in fisheries in the last three decades

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Part 1 of this article (icsf.net/SU/Yem/EN/37/art06.pdf) covered two major developments that appeared in the last three decades in the literature on women in fisheries. The first was a shift in research focus from women's *labour* to women's *survival* and *livelihood*. The second was spread of the idea of women's *empowerment* as the notions of women's *exploitation* and *oppression* began to be discredited.

The third development of note in the literature on women in fisheries is the rise of rights-based arguments. Two main types of rights-based arguments have appeared—one from fisheries managers, which promotes private property rights, and the other, the assertion by small-scale fishing communities of their human rights.

In response to the crisis brought on by industrial overfishing, privatized quota regimes and professionalization were introduced in many developed countries of the North. Many studies have documented how this led to quota concentration in the hands of fishing companies and pushed women out of core fishing. In fact, the very crisis caused by industrial overfishing was used to drive away small fish producers, and strengthen the hold of large players on the sector. Since the late 1980s, this model of privatization of the fisheries and the shift of responsibility for regulation from State to the market, is being transferred from the North to the less developed and underdeveloped countries of the South with countries like South Africa adopting quota-based fisheries. New fisheries management proposals, such as the World Bank's wealth-based fisheries management approach, continue to push for privatizing fisheries. These use the idea of individual rights to build the case for privatization.

SEBASTIAN MATHEW

Large-scale trawlers anchored in fishing harbour, Madagascar. The very crisis caused by industrial overfishing was used to drive away small fish producers

At the same time, there is also a case being made for adopting a different kind of rights-based framework—a human-rights approach to fisheries development. This argues that fishing communities are entitled to the full realization of their human-rights. Human rights, according to this view, encompass economic, social, cultural and political rights and are the entitlements of not just individuals but of communities as well. It is argued that since the human-rights approach is backed by an international apparatus of universally held norms, it provides a stronger basis for holding States accountable.

How effective is the human-rights argument and does it safeguard women's rights within traditional fisheries? Before these questions can be answered, the point to note is that community rights are usually based on the idea of customary use, and not ownership. Thus, the rights of small-scale fishing communities usually derive from customary and generational use of the coasts; very rarely do poor fishers own individual land titles. The idea of human rights, on the other hand, is a fairly new idea, emerging out of the industrial age. At its heart is the sanctity of an individual's right to property. Human rights are deeply linked to the ideas of democracy, private property and free markets, the citizen-individual being at the centre of all three concepts.

Multiple questions arise. If by human-rights in fisheries is meant the *collective ownership* of fishing lands and resources, then how would conflict be resolved when the community right to property clashes with private property rights? This is not just an academic question, since, in the present era of market-led growth, the coasts are intensely contested properties. If, on the other hand, by human rights is meant the preferential access of fishing communities to lands and resources, how does the human-rights argument ensure that

such access is not only for the elites within fishing communities but also for poor women and others at the bottom of community hierarchies? Further, can access rights provide long-lasting security? Access rights are unlikely to be strongly opposed by the capitalist class, which is well aware that industry and development usually make such rights meaningless over time. There is also the related question of the human rights of the non-fishing poor. With food prices soaring and in the absence of social security, fishing is drawing increasing numbers of the traditionally non-fishing rural poor as a way out of poverty and starvation. If the human-rights discourse is formulated around the rights of the traditional fishing community, how then would the human rights of the non-fishing poor, such as occasional fishers, be addressed?

Donor aid, as the handmaiden of capitalism, has played a key role in manufacturing a global and uniform discourse on development, that is to say, in establishing 'hegemony'.

A major problem with the human-rights discourse is that human rights are usually articulated in relation to the public domain and rarely linked to the domestic or private sphere. Human rights are devised in ways that typically ignore the crucial fact that the public sphere exists precisely because women's hidden labour in the private sphere (household) enables it to do so. Women rarely enjoy equal and autonomous status as full citizens. Women's sexuality and fertility are hardly in their control but exist to serve the needs of marriage, family, community, State and capital. In addition, women are burdened with so much non-valued work related to household production and reproduction that rarely can they cross the boundary of the private sphere into the public to play any sort of empowered public role.

For the human-rights approach in fisheries to be effective, it must engage with several questions. First, how does it regard private property in any way that is fundamentally different from privatized rights regimes? Second, is the human-rights argument not likely to, in fact, facilitate community elites to gain for themselves ownership over what were earlier common/ shared property resources? Third, how would it protect against the exploitation of women and other marginalized sections within fishing communities, and related to this, how would it accommodate the human rights of the poor outside the traditional fishing community, such as occasional fishers? Finally, how would the human rights approach address the specific nature of gender-based oppression and exploitation when it excludes the private sphere, the primary site of these crimes?

The fourth major development in fisheries literature has been the emergence of the term 'community'. Fishing communities have existed for generations along the coasts. Their political struggles against displacement and dispossession by industrial fisheries are well documented in the literature. Since the late 1980s, however, the concept of community has entered global policy as an outcome of an institutionalized response to these struggles. This distinction between the community as a political entity and as an institutional entity is very important, but one that is increasingly blurred in real life. The role of aid is central to the blurring of this difference.

Since the 1980s, in the years following the Washington Consensus, the State (government and its agencies) in poor countries was forced to withdraw from regulation. Discussions on development began to revolve around the privatization of all regulation, including that of natural resource management. Since the decade of the 1990s, models of co-management, and later, of community-based coastal resource management, began to spread in fisheries. The few positive experiments in community-based coastal resource management have been donor-aided pilot projects. As the State withdrew, industry had to deal with a new reality of increased private participation in the social sector. Roles that were earlier performed by government—for example, drafting regulatory norms or providing disaster relief—were now being taken over by private bodies. Increasingly, this included the NGO sector. Market-oriented policies received national legitimacy as well as the rubber stamp of civil-society representation with the participation of NGOs. As a result, NGOs came under pressure to surrender their oppositional role and align with the dominant ideology. Wittingly or unwittingly, they became instrumental for pushing neoliberalism into local administrative institutions. In the context of South America, one author writes: "As the neoliberal regimes at the top devastated communities by inundating the country with cheap imports, extracting external debt payment, abolishing labour legislation and creating a growing mass of low-paid and unemployed workers, the NGOs were funded to provide 'self-help' projects, 'popular education,' and job training, to temporarily absorb small groups of poor, to co-opt local leaders, and to undermine anti-system struggles."

The growing capitalist class in the fishing sector provoked an assertion of community identity. In some countries, representational politics became very important and a hardening of community boundaries along lines of identity began to take place. While this was sometimes a vibrant mobilizational force, it greatly impacted the women's question. In fishery-related advocacy, women's rights began to be increasingly articulated as community rights. The World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), for example, asserted that it was important to "ensure that our sector is not

weakened by dividing it, putting men on one side and women on the other, in a context where, increasingly, small-scale fishers from the North and South are having to abandon their way of life due to the impact of government policies which favour industrial fisheries interests." The suggestion that the fishing sector would be weakened if women were to organize around their own issues brought back memories of the strong opposition of Left parties several decades ago to the idea of women organizing autonomously, on the grounds that this would divide working-class struggles. A loss of focus on women's rights is today evident in civil society statements from the fishery sector which fail to directly address the basis of women's oppression within the family and community. In the absence of any fundamental questioning of oppressive community structures, the call to "protect the cultural identities, dignity and traditional rights of fishing communities and indigenous peoples", as contained, for example, in the Bangkok Statement, could, in fact, have negative consequences for vulnerable groups, such as women or the poor or sexuality minorities, who have, historically been denied their rights in the community.

In poor countries, women from fishing communities are increasingly moving into wage labour and thus finding an access to independent economic means. At the same time, governments are being forced to recognize the idea of women's rights. This is strengthened by NGO interventions. It is, therefore, becoming inevitable for communities to respond to women both not just as part of community structures but also as individuals. In this context, it remains to be seen how women's rights that derive from gender and citizenship are reconciled with practices that result from deeply entrenched community power structures such as religion or caste.

Fifth and finally, the fisheries literature reflects the growing dominance of donor aid. It may be argued that the developments covered so far—the loss of focus on labour; the loss of focus on women's oppression and exploitation; the loss of focus on the rights of the oppressed and the emergence of human rights; and finally, the institutionalization of community struggles—could not have happened as they did in the last few decades without the key role of aid in manufacturing a global and uniform discourse on development, that is to say, in establishing 'hegemony'.

Donor aid has played a significant role in the spread of globalization and the 'free market'. If the free market is regarded as capital's iron fist, then aid is the velvet glove that sheaths it. Structural conditionalities tied to aid and pushed by the Big Three—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—significantly shaped the development of fisheries. These three institutions worked as a single global economic institution whose three parts specialized in stabilization (IMF), structural adjustment (World Bank) and trade liberalization (WTO) to serve a single theme—free trade. Donor aid in fisheries was tied to conditionalities promoting modernization and industrialization, making a destructive model of development in the marine and culture fisheries widespread in the global South.

Early aid in fisheries was routed through national governments. Thus, in the 1950s, capital was poured into offshore bottom trawlers and distant-water fleets in industrialized countries, while, in the South, inter-governmental aid assisted the modernization of craft and gear. Following the fisheries crisis, Southern markets had to be speedily opened up but the route used by the capitalist class until now—inter-governmental aid—was slow. The Washington Consensus of the 1980s served to remove governmental controls on capital flows. From 'growth with distribution', the mantra became 'market-only growth'. For this, aid was the best route. Structural adjustment conditionalities were tied to aid. Poor loan-seeking countries of the global South were forced to adopt export-led models of capitalist growth in the fisheries. The World Bank-IMF-WTO trinity used donor aid in carrot-and-stick arrangements to coerce governments to liberalize trade and capital flows, to deregulate, to privatize and to specialize in exports. A boom in global fish trade followed, fuelled also by increases in ecologically unsustainable forms of industrial aquaculture. In the years that followed, income disparities between the rich and poor skyrocketed and the global economy was ravaged by food shortages, oil and food price hikes.

By the turn of the millennium, it became clear that the objectives of the Washington Consensus were more or less achieved. Over the period 1996 to 2004, while all other forms of development aid tended to flatten out, aid for governance and the rule of law increased steadily from 10 per cent in 1996 to 45 per cent in 2004. This indicated that economic restructuring was largely in place in the global South, with only minor hurdles remaining in the path of complete deregulation and free trade. It now became critical for capital to consolidate its hold over the newly emerging markets in the South. In the last ten years or so, capital has, therefore, pushed for two things. One, it has pushed for the transfer of regulation away from the State to private bodies to ensure that regulatory norms for the environment, the coasts, for labour and so on are made industry-friendly. Two, in order that the

people whose lives and livelihoods have been destroyed by economic reforms don't actually die of starvation and disease, capital has pushed for the specific targeting of aid to the most impoverished. The success of both programmes—privatization and targeted aid—depends, however, on efficient management and delivery systems. For these reasons, the capitalist agenda has now shifted to 'good governance', and, so, the alignment of aid with national priorities is the focus of the Paris Declaration of 2005, widely endorsed by donor agencies and State governments.

An extraordinary consensus emerged in the social sector during this period, blunting any effective opposition to the Washington Consensus. Gender empowerment and mainstreaming—the project of integrating women into capitalism—became a necessary component of every project plan. The 'greening of investments' became paramount. Policy elites in Southern countries drafted national environmental plans in consultation with banks. Environmental NGOs drafted the project documentation associated with loans for aquaculture, coastal management, forestry, mining and agriculture. At the same time, the privatization of all regulation, including that of natural resource management, was vigorously pursued. In fisheries, the notions of co-management, and later, community-based coastal resource management gained currency. Aid flowed into capacity building and skills training for community-based organizations and networks that worked directly with indigenous groups and natural resource-based communities. Regulation, which might restrict industrial growth, was increasingly replaced by management-based models involving consensus among so-called civil society stakeholders in matters of coastal zone, marine and biodiversity protection.

The huge expansion of industry in the last few decades completely restructured economic relations in the fishing sector. Today, fish is produced in poor countries and consumed in the developed world or by ruling elites in producing countries. This economic restructuring has, no doubt, created work opportunities for poor women but in poorly paid and exploitative conditions. Although a much-needed critique of the industrialization model of economic development has emerged, the shift in focus from labour to environment during this time has meant that the poor and the marginalized are seen less as an exploited labour force than as the natural custodians of the environment.

A climate of political consensus, of 'positive' rather than 'oppositional' agendas, is in vogue. The women's question is framed in terms of 'gender empowerment' rather than opposition to patriarchy and capital. This is at a time when women's labour is being mobilized at an unprecedented scale and concentrated in the most exploitative jobs to fuel economic growth in fisheries, with escalating violence against women. Community-based identity politics have gained in this period but the family and community, as structures that sanction women's oppression, increasingly escape criticism. Resistance tries to combine human rights and community rights but without focus on women's rights. NGOs are surrendering their oppositional role, keeping themselves confined mainly to issues of livelihood and survival. The need for a politically powerful labour power which is able to negotiate for justice and equality is all but forgotten.

In a context where capitalist fisheries is built upon the unvalued or undervalued labour of poor women, new analyses and news forms of organizing are needed to fundamentally challenge this exploitation. Industry cannot be left unregulated to do as it pleases but must be forced, through stringent regulation, to look beyond profitability alone. Community-based forms of mobilization face many challenges. Can communities form their own market mechanisms that are not modelled after capitalist forms, and evolve non-cash-based economies? Can communities demand for the regulation of capital and its relations with both people and the environment? Can they collectivize the ownership of property and the means of production, ensuring the rights of those who labour while delegitimizing the profits of the profiteers? Can they address the rights of the non-fishing poor? Can housework be collectivized? Will the full labour of women be recognized and valued? Can women's fertility and sexuality be freed from the institutions of family and private property? Can the analytical and political clarity required for such agendas come solely from identity-based politics? Similarly, would identity-based politics ever tolerate the struggle against patriarchy? Would it not necessarily require bringing back an emphasis on class along with other contradictions based on gender, race, caste, sexuality, and so on? Is not the radical re-envisioning of women's politics an urgent need of our times?

The literature on women in fisheries reminds us that rights and democracy, like charity, always begin at home. But unlike charity, these will never be handed to us by some gracious benefactor. At every level—be it the family, the community or the larger world—these rights must be systematically fought for.