

Through the gender lens

A gender analysis of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication

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The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the Guidelines), which were discussed in a meeting in Rome in February 2014, make a serious attempt to include the role of women in small-scale fisheries, address issues of importance for women's lives and livelihoods and attempt to ensure gender-sensitive policies and measures. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) played a significant role in this, highlighting during a series of regional consultations, the importance both of recognizing women's role in the fisheries and fishing communities and of respecting women's human rights and dignity in society. The CSOs also attended the technical consultations on the Guidelines where the text was negotiated. Further, they lobbied governments to adopt text proposals that defended the interests of small-scale fishing communities, including proposals on gender issues.

A major strength of the Guidelines, on which ongoing discussions are taking place under the aegis of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), is that it refers to all actors and all activities in small-scale fisheries—pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest, both commercial and subsistence—and include the role of women. The Guidelines also emphasize the community and intersectoral

dimensions of small-scale fisheries and recognize the interdependency of activities in the community.

The Preface of the Guidelines says: “Small-scale fisheries employ 90 percent of the world's capture fishers and fish workers, about half of whom are women...Many small-scale fishers and fish workers are self-employed and engaged in directly providing food for their household and communities as well as working in commercial fishing, processing and marketing. Fishing and related activities often underpin the local economies in coastal, lakeshore and riparian communities and constitute an engine, generating multiplier effects in other sectors.”

The text of the Guidelines makes a serious attempt to be inclusive and in many sections we see the phrases “both men and women” or “including women” with specific attention to marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Part I of the document deals with the objectives, scope and guiding principles of the Guidelines. In Chapter 1 (Objectives), there is no specific reference to gender or women in any of the objectives of the Guidelines. However, a special section in the end says “these objectives should be achieved through the promotion of a human rights-based approach, by empowering small-scale fishing communities, *including both men and women*, to participate in decision-making processes, and assume responsibilities for sustainable use of fishery resources...” (Italics added)

The Guidelines take into account a wide range of important considerations and principles described in Chapter 3 (Guiding Principles). These include the recognition of dignity and human rights of all individuals, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, transparency and accountability, holistic and integrated approaches and social and environmental responsibility. The Guiding Principles have two specific references to gender and women's rights. The most significant is the fourth guiding principle according to which “Gender equity and equality is fundamental to any development. Recognizing the vital role of women in small-scale fisheries, equal rights and opportunities should be promoted.” In addition, the second guiding principle concerning “Respect of cultures” gives special attention to “encouraging women's leadership” with specific reference to Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which advocates, among other

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Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary, ICSF, at the Technical Consultation on SSF Guidelines that addressed issues of importance for women's lives and livelihoods

things, the elimination of prejudicial gender-based customary practices.

Part II of the Guidelines deals with key issues of importance for Responsible fisheries and sustainable development. It is significant that this part of the document has a full chapter—Chapter 8—on Gender Equality. The text of this chapter has references to strategies such as gender mainstreaming and establishing policies and legislation to challenge discrimination against women and realize gender equality in small-scale fisheries development. From a gender perspective it is of particular importance that the text says: “States should endeavour to secure women’s equal participation in decision making for policies directed towards small-scale fisheries.” Specific attention is paid towards encouraging women’s participation in fisheries organizations. The text adds further that “States should adopt specific measures to address discrimination against women, while creating spaces for CSOs, in particular for women fish workers and their organizations, to participate in the monitoring of their implementation.” The chapter also includes references to women’s equal access to extension services and technical access, including legal support and the development of “better technologies of importance and appropriate to women in small-scale fisheries.”

Besides the chapter on Gender Equality, there are some other useful references specifically to women’s work and rights in Part II of the Guidelines on key issues for “Responsible fisheries and sustainable development”. These are about women and tenure, participation in fisheries management, social development, employment and decent work, and women’s role in the post-harvest chain. However these references are not very explicit. The most explicit reference from a gender perspective is the one which deals violence and where the text in Chapter 6 says: “All parties should take steps to institute measures that aim to eliminate violence and to protect women exposed to such violence in small-scale fishing communities. States should ensure access to justice for victims of violence, abuse etc, *including within the household and the community*” (Italics added). In the rest of the text of this part there are no specific references to women or gender and therefore it remains to be seen how the text is interpreted and if this is done from a gender perspective.

Part III of the document deals with guidelines for “Ensuring an enabling

environment and supporting implementation.” In this part Chapter 10 and 11 have some important references to *gender-sensitive policies* and *the production of gender-disaggregated data, designing of gender-sensitive interventions* and *gender-sensitive indicators* for monitoring purposes.

In Chapter 12 (Capacity Development), there is an important reference to enabling “women to organize autonomously at various levels on issues of particular relevance to them.” Also there is attention to “the equitable participation of women in representative structures in small-scale fisheries subsector along the entire value chain.”

Finally in Chapter 13, Implementation support and Monitoring, the text says that States and other parties should secure “the effective dissemination of information on gender and women’s role in small-scale fisheries and to highlight steps that need to be taken to improve women’s status and their work.”

What are the gender-based implications of the clauses and references described above? While having a specific chapter on Gender Equality could be considered as a major strength of the Guidelines, it could also be seen as a weakness. From a gender perspective, the Guidelines would have been much stronger had gender been integrated as a cross-cutting issue. This was also what CSOs had aimed for. However, the majority of governments felt that gender should be referred to in a separate chapter. And so, while this was done, several references to gender or women in the draft text were deleted or watered down, including proposals from CSOs. Thus, the chapter on Disaster Risks and Climate Change (Chapter 9) has no reference to gender anymore, despite all the evidence that natural and human-made disasters have a differential impact on women and men. Furthermore, the text of the Guidelines gives the impression that the terms “gender” and “women” are synonymous. The slogan “Stop fixing women, start fixing the context” is also applicable here.

The Guidelines aim to promote a human rights-based approach. A human rights-based approach to small-scale fisheries development needs a transformative outlook aimed at ending social injustice and inequality. However since little attention is paid to social analysis in the document, it is difficult to imagine how the Guidelines will ensure the implementation of such an approach. Nowhere in the document, not even in the chapter on Gender Equality (Chapter 8), a real gender issues in small-scale fisheries actually

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defined and nor is it explained what the impact of unequal power relations between men and women could be for a sustainable development of small-scale fisheries and the wellbeing of communities.

Women of small-scale fishing communities have become marginalized in the fisheries value chain, if not pushed out of it; their work, knowledge and capacities are generally poorly recognized and valued; and their interest is often not represented. They struggle with the burden of double workloads, poor working conditions, taboos and prejudices, sexual violence and psychological humiliation. A gender perspective of sustainable small scale fisheries development therefore needs a transformative approach focused on challenging the underlying root causes of gender injustice and inequality, including those resulting from patriarchal norms.

There is a tendency in the Guidelines to rely on gender mainstreaming and other measures of a more technical nature—making sure that policies are in place, for example, or promoting procedures—instead of advancing a substantive agenda for social change. An attempt of the CSOs to replace the term “gender mainstreaming”, which was seen as a concept which generally is poorly understood and applied, failed. The following example is from the chapter on Gender Equality, where the CSO proposal for alternative meaningful wording is erased and the term gender mainstreaming is kept in the adopted text: “All parties should recognize that achieving gender equality requires concerted efforts by all and that gender mainstreaming, ~~gender equity and justice, with the aim of addressing the unequal power relations between men and women,~~ should be an integral part of all small-scale fisheries development strategies.” (Text strikeout added)

The text of the Guidelines often cites the phrase “including marginal and vulnerable groups”. The CSOs strongly lobbied for this. This reference can be considered as one of the strengths of the Guidelines because it emphasizes an inclusive approach. However in many societies vulnerable groups are generally associated as targets of social welfare and not as agents of social change. An inclusive approach is no guarantee of equal benefits of policies and programmes. While women (and women’s organizations) in small-scale fisheries are marginalized, they are also often subjected to patronizing attitudes with little opportunity to make their own decisions on issues of importance to their lives, livelihoods and wellbeing.

A major limitation of the Guidelines is of course its voluntary nature and this is explicitly emphasized in Chapter 2 (Nature and Scope) where the text says “These Guidelines should be interpreted and applied in accordance with national legal systems and their institutions.” This reference is repeatedly made in the Guidelines. National legal systems and their institutions generally reflect prevailing gender relations and other social inequalities. In societies with rigid gender relations what this means is that the text of the Guidelines concerning gender equality and women’s participation may not be applied or be applied in only a limited way.

The Chair’s Text, despite several weaknesses, does provide an opportunity for a transformative plan of action for implementation. This includes gender issues. It recognizes the importance of adhering to human rights standards and gender equality as fundamental to development. The Guidelines have several references that address key issues of importance to women in small-scale fisheries and communities and the promotion of equal rights and opportunities in small-scale fisheries development. However it remains to be seen how the text will be interpreted and applied by States and other relevant parties, including fisheries organizations. Women’s rights and gender issues are generally issues of a sensitive nature and often meet resistance, denial or low priority.

In Chapter 2 (Nature and Scope), the text says: “To ensure transparency and accountability in the application of the Guidelines, it is important to ascertain which activities and operators are considered small-scale, and to identify vulnerable and marginalized groups needing greater attention.... States should ensure that this identification and application are guided by meaningful and substantive participatory, consultative, multi-level and objective-oriented processes so that the voices of both men and women are heard.”

This certainly opens up opportunities for actors in the small-scale fisheries, including women, to make their voices heard. However, they should be seen not as “objects of development solutions” but as “agents of social change”. Therefore it is of crucial importance that CSOs, including women-in-fisheries organizations, promote a human rights-based approach to the small-scale fisheries sector and jointly work out a powerful action plan for the implementation of the Guidelines that focus on transformative change for equitable, gender just, and sustainable small-scale fisheries development. ❏