

Women in Fisheries in Asia: 1978 – 2016

From fisherwomen's struggles against unfair taxation in the 1970s in India to organizing global programmes to forge common understanding and strategy, women in fisheries in Asia have come a long way

By **Meryl Williams**
(MerylJWilliams@gmail.com), with inputs from Choo Poh Sze, Kaniz Fatema, Jayne Gallagher, Marieta Sumagaysay, Malasri Khumsri, Jin Yeong Kim, Mayangita Kirana, Nalini Nayak, Mohammad Nuruzzaman, B. Shanthi, Indah Susilowatu and Veikila Vuki

This article on the milestones achieved by women in the fisheries in Asia-Pacific is based on existing material and contributions from several colleagues (see above). Many more milestones are still to be added, but the following will give a flavour of what has happened. The milestones summarised here are varied—sometimes uplifting, often depressing, some big, others small, but all indicative of women fishworkers' struggles. The milestones are just a start and are somewhat biased towards research and government agency actions, and contain less than we would like on grassroots action. Part of the lack of grassroots coverage is due to the lack of public visibility, especially on the internet, of women's grassroots groups and actions. Often, grassroots groups are hosted under national fisheries federations and do not have their own identities, websites and secretariats. Therefore, the present version of the Asia-Pacific milestones could be considered to be a work in progress, and we hope to keep it updated. Your contributions, corrections and comments are welcome.

1978

In Kerala, India, women fishworkers protested against exorbitant market taxes and won the struggle to not pay market tax if they took only one head load of fish to the market.

1982

In Kerala, India, women demanded the right to use public transport to take their fish to market. Without access to transport, women had to walk several kilometres, sometimes up to eight or ten km, to and from the market. After two years of discussions with the government, a decision was made to provide special buses for women to take their fish to the market. Eventually, these buses were run by the MatsyaFed (Kerala State Co-operative Federation for Fisheries Development). Initially there were several buses but the numbers gradually reduced as the bus timetables did not respond to the times that women demanded—or too few women used the services. Coordination of the service was poor and the MatsyaFed lacked the will to find amicable solutions. Nevertheless, a couple of buses still ply to the fish landing centres for women to purchase fish and bring it back to the market to sell.

In 1989, women in Kerala, India, were registered separately in the Fishermen's Welfare Corporation so that they too could get the benefits of the cooperatives and the famine cum relief scheme which recognized even single women fish vendors.

1989

From its headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia, the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC, then South Pacific Commission) began women in fisheries work, with a focus on women in post-harvest processing. In 1991, the SPC eventually appointed its first Women's Fisheries Programme Officer, but the post was only filled for about a year and remained vacant until 1995.

In Maharashtra, India, following a petition from women to the Railway Minister by the National Fishworkers Federation, a wagon on the train from Palghar to Mumbai was provided for women fish vendors. This is still operating.

1990

At the suggestion of Dr M.C. Nandeesh, the Asian Fisheries Society (Indian Branch) conducted its first Women in Fisheries in India Workshop in Mangalore, India, and [published the proceedings](#) in 1992.

PIYASHI DEBROY / ICAR



The Asian Fisheries Society's (AFS) 4th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF4) was held in Yeosu, South Korea

1993

A [Pacific Women in Fisheries Network](#) was established in Fiji. The Network is registered under the (Fiji) Charitable Trusts Act, and is a consortium of fishers, researchers, gender and development specialists and scientists from non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), governmental and regional agencies that share a common interest in addressing the urgent need to strengthen the involvement and improve the conditions of women in the fisheries sector in Fiji. At its height in the 1990s, it had some 60 members in the Pacific region. There was a ten-year lapse of activity due to core members proceeding on professional development stints but was revived in the mid-2013. In 1995, it published "[Fishing for Answers: Women and Fisheries in the Pacific Islands.](#)" The Network now has a fulltime coordinator and it is currently working closely with World Conservation Society (WCS) in Fiji.

1994

At the instigation of Dr M.C. Nandeesha, the non-government organization, Partnership for Development in Kampuchea (PADEK), and partners organized the Women in Fisheries Cambodia Workshop, and published the proceedings (Note: For copies of the proceedings, please contact the author).

1995

At the 4th Asian Fisheries Forum in Beijing, the Asian Fisheries Society and PADEK held a women-in-fisheries photo competition.

The UNDP Women in Fisheries Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop was held in the Philippines and, in addition to a large volume of proceedings, agreed upon the Iloilo Resolution (UNDP SU/TCDC 1995) that was sent to the 4th World Conference on Women in Development, held in Beijing, China.

Also this year, the SPC started a Women's Fisheries Development Section and appointed an Officer to lead it.

1996

PADEK and several national partners held the "Women in Fisheries in the Indo-China Workshop" in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and published the proceedings (Note: For copies of the proceedings, please contact the author).

In South Korea, the first meeting of women in fishing villages was jointly organized by five fisheries cooperatives. Women's greater political activity in fishers' organizations was preceded by demographic changes, such as the aging of the rural population, increasing work opportunities elsewhere, and declining

fisheries resources. The work women did in the fisheries was being transformed, with some women even going to sea with their husbands.

1997

The Cambodian Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Cambodian Fisheries Administration (FIA).

The [SPC Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin](#) was launched.

1998

The Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) Symposium on Women in Fisheries in Asia was held during the 5th Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiang-Mai, Thailand. This was the first such event by the AFS and the predecessor of similar events at each of the subsequent Asian Fisheries (and Aquaculture) Forums.

In the Philippines, registration of fisherfolk began to include women, in contrast to the past practice of recognizing only male fishers. The 1998 Fisheries Code (Section 19) provided for registration of municipal fisherfolk by local government units.

In the Pacific, the SPC transformed its Women's Fisheries Development Section into the Community Fisheries Section. At this time, in the Western and Central Pacific region, many male fisheries leaders expressed concern that development work that focused on women was not inclusive of all members of the community. By 2003, the Community Fisheries Section had moved even further from focusing on women when it became the Coastal Fisheries Management Section.

1999

Yemaya, the ICSF newsletter on women and fisheries was launched from the ICSF Secretariat Office in Chennai, India. *Yemaya* regularly covers gender issues in fisheries. It has systematically documented the various forms of gender based inequalities. Its articles deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities, including recent research or meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. It also contains life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for recognition of theirwork within the fishery.

Also this year, the Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network was established by Department of Fisheries (DoF)

The Lao Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Department of Fisheries and Livestock (DLF) and Living Aquatic Resources and Research Center (LAREC)

2000

Philippines researchers and other experts established the nation-wide NGO [National Network on Women in Fisheries \(WINFISH\)](#) to maintain the visibility of women and gender agenda in agency programs, undertake research and advocacy work through its biennial conference, training engagements, publications and individual members' areas of influence. WINFISH was officially incorporated in 2001.

The Thailand Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Department of Fisheries (DoF).

The Mekong Network for Gender Promotion in Fisheries Development (NGF) was formed, as a regional forum for the networks already established in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The NGF has been continuously supported by the Mekong River Commission's Fisheries Programme in organizing its regular annual meetings for updating of network activities implementation and sharing experiences on gender awareness and mainstreaming activities implemented in the four member countries.

In Australia, the national [Women's Industry Network Seafood Community \(WINSC\)](#) was formed and incorporated as a Registrable Australian Body. WINSC is the only national organisation in Australia which represents the women of the seafood industry. It provides a unique network role in tapping a valuable resource of Australia.

2001

The AFS Symposium on Women in Global Fisheries was held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, as part of the 6th Asian Fisheries Forum. After this conference, the organisers decided to broaden their theme to be "gender and fisheries (and aquaculture)."

In Bangladesh in 2001, the Government passed a law prohibiting harvest of wild shrimp post larvae (PL) from coastal river mouths. More than a decade later, this law, driven by conservation considerations, was to have unintended gender consequences when it was finally policed. Then 400,000-500,000 wild shrimp post-larvae (PL) collectors living in coastal slums felt the brunt of the law. They now urgently need new livelihood options. By 2015, with the help of the Navy and Coast Guard, all PL gears and traps were being destroyed, leading coastal people to migrate to inland cities and towns, even though they lack the skills and capital to prosper there. Women and children have become particularly vulnerable.

2002

At the SPC in the Pacific, the EU funded PROCFish project on coastal finfish and invertebrate fisheries. By the time this project was finished in 2009, it had collected and analysed a large volume of gender disaggregated catch and fishing participation data. The final report of the PROCFish Project is available [here](#).

2004

The AFS First Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF1) was held in Penang, Malaysia, at the 7th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum.

2005

In 2005 in Indonesia, the fisher women's cooperative [Puspita Bahari](#) was initiated to change the marginalization of women through this fisher woman cooperative. Puspita Bahari works with the community to learn about gender equality and income-generating activities.

2006

With the increasing feminization of the Bangladesh fish sector labor force, especially in the shrimp and aquaculture segments, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) began a capacity building program for factory workers and managers. Over several years, through the program, UNIDO produced a training manual, training of trainers to develop Master Trainers and gender focused training for factory level workers in most of the operating factories in the major coastal districts.

In the shrimp industry in Bangladesh, the Solidarity Center (SC) a US based NGO working on labor rights, lodged a Global System of Preferences (GSP) withdrawal case against Bangladesh, blaming the use of child laborers and causing Bangladesh to lose its trade preference status, and therefore many workers, including many women, to lose their jobs.

In Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, the women members of the Maharashtra Fishworkers Union succeeded, after several years of action, to get the government to accept that they had rights and that street and other markets should be protected. Later, the government assisted them to map their markets so that their rights to the public space would be protected in keeping with the Street Vendors Act of 2012.

In Tamil Nadu, India, from 2006-2015, a study was undertaken by researchers at the Central Institute for Brackishwater Aquaculture (CIBA) to gain a picture of rural

women in small-scale aquaculture. Urban male migration and other social problems were leading to an increased number of permanently or temporarily women headed households. The nature and extent of involvement of women in aquaculture was found to vary greatly from place to place and within a place it varied according to caste, religion and position in the family hierarchy.

2007

The Asian Fisheries Society held the 2nd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF2) in Kochi, India, at the 8th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum.

2009

The Government of the Republic of the Philippines proclaimed Act No. 9710, “An Act Providing for the Magna Carta of Women,”—landmark legislation that was enacted in March 2010. Its provisions address rights, benefits and the role of women fisherfolk especially in coastal communities

2010

The 2010 FAO-NACA Global Aquaculture Conference (Phuket, Thailand) included a gender themed paper for the first time, “Sustaining aquaculture by developing human capacity and enhancing opportunities for women.” The resulting Phuket Declaration called all to “support gender sensitive policies and implement programmes that facilitate economic, social and political empowerment of women through their active participation in aquaculture development, in line with the globally accepted principles of gender equality and women’s empowerment.”

At Mahabalipuram, India, ICSF held the global workshop “[Recasting the Net: Defining a Gender Agenda for Sustaining Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities](#).” This was a defining event and its comprehensive report very important as an input to the consultative processes of the Small-scale Fisheries Guidelines, adopted in 2014.

The Spain-FAO Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (S & SE Asia) (RFLP, 2009-2013) began its gender element, working on normative products and projects in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.

2011

The Spain-FAO-RFLP produced the manual “Mainstreaming gender into project cycle management in the fisheries sector.”

The AFS 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3) was held in Shanghai, China as part of the

9th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum. Back to back with this event, FAO held the workshop “Workshop on Future Directions for Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries: Action, Research and Development.” This workshop subsequently led FAO to undertake an internal stock taking and planning exercise on “Mainstreaming Gender in Fisheries and Aquaculture.”

In South Korea, the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives adopted a Charter on Fisherwomen. The Federation of Korean Fisherwomen was launched under the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives [NFFC, or Suhyup].

2012

Arising from global FAO promotion of gender awareness in food and aquaculture, and also from the GAF3 events of 2011, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) undertook internal planning and produced the “[Gender in Fisheries Roadmap](#)” for India.

2013

The AFS 4th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF4) was held in Yeosu, South Korea.

In South Korea, 39 regional unions had a membership 7,702 fisherwomen. The Female Farmers and Fishers Act was passed to help improve the status of fisherwomen. It protects the women’s rights and interests, and gives the women professional status. State and local governments support the political, economic, social and cultural development of fisherwomen’s skills, establishes a comprehensive policy to improve the quality of life, and provides financial support. Fisherwomen’s technical training and management is being developed, and producer groups are supported. Fisherwomen’s participation in decision-making is improving, along with the women’s status in fisheries.

In the Philippines, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) has drawn up a Comprehensive Gender Mainstreaming Program that integrates the gender dimension in its structures, policies, procedures and culture with gender equality as a goal. BFAR reconstituted the Gender and Development Focal Point System and has an [active Facebook page](#) promoting news of its gender equality activities.

2014

In 2014 in Bangladesh, following the disastrous Rana Plaza (garment factory) building collapse in 2013, the International Labour Organization (ILO) took over the UNIDO

fish processing factory work initiated in 2006 by UNIDO. For the shrimp factories, ILO initiated Health Risk Assessment training and the UNIDO BEST project started Occupational Health and Safety (OSH) training.

The Labor Laws 2006 were amended in 2014. Over 80 provisos were changed with the aim to provide better treatment of women workers. Explicit labor rules were enacted in 2015 for the first time.

In Indonesia, 2014 recorded a drop in female employment in the fisheries with 14.5 million women found to be work in in fisheries-related jobs, down from the 2008 women's workforce figure of 16 million. This drop was attributed largely to industrial modernization and mechanization.

The NACA-USAID MARKET gender project in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam was launched. This was the first gender project of the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific. It was finalized in 2015.

2015

From 2015 in Bangladesh, the Solidarity Center (SC) ended nine years of lobbying against the shrimp industry and began to engage with the shrimp processing factories. SC started running factory based labor training for the shrimp processing workers. Of 50,000-60,000 workers in the Bangladesh fish and shrimp processing factories, the UNIDO, ILO and SC programs have trained 7,500 people in labor rights.

In Manila, Philippines, 14 civil society organizations from Southeast Asian countries met in the Regional Workshop on Management of Community-Based Coastal Resources. The Workshop discussed the importance of womens's role and the need to protect their rights in small-scale fisheries and coastal resource management. ❏