

Gender equality in and through fisheries

This article identifies key priorities and challenges that lie in the path of achieving gender equality targets, particularly in the high-poverty and increasingly resource-scarce context of Southeast Asian fisheries.

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Fishing is often classified as men's occupation, and women are believed to have little role to play. However, in reality, women comprise almost 47 per cent of the 120 million people engaged in capture fisheries. Though women play a large role in fish trade and fish processing, these roles have been relatively invisible until recently when researchers started paying attention to the fishing industry's value chain. When trade and processing began to be included in the analysis, women's substantial contribution to the fishing industry became visible. There is now more and more evidence that women's participation in fisheries is important.

Traditionally, women's roles in the fisheries industry have been complementary to men's roles; however, due to the gender blindness of decision makers and policy makers round the world, women's work has been unacknowledged in policy and institutions. All grassroots and outreach support structures are largely targeted at men. This invisibility of women's roles has a real impact on women, and on fisheries. For example, after the tsunami of 2005, support for fishing villages was focused on boats, and fishing activities done by women were ignored. In many countries, fishing cooperatives have only

men as members, since only those who fish on boats are considered to be fishers.

Women's presence in fisheries cooperatives is very low due to concepts of family and household as well. For example, in fishery cooperatives in Japan, the one-household-one-member rule is in place. Since men are considered heads of households, they are the ones who become regular decision making members, and hence it is extremely rare for women to be regular members of cooperatives. As fisheries resources dwindle, women's role in aquaculture, conservation, processing and trade is now becoming more and more important. It is therefore imperative that policy and support structures engage with women in the fisheries industry if they want to make an impact on the industry.

Due to this invisibility of women, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5)—“achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”—takes on a special relevance in the fisheries sector. SDG 5 is one of the 17 SDGs, and, although other SDGs also refer to gender equality, this is the only one that is solely dedicated to gender equality. It is both an independent gender equality goal as well as a prerequisite for other SDGs. It not only carries ahead the targets of Millennium Development Goal 3, but has expanded to encompass wider dimensions of relevance to women's empowerment. Targets of SDG 5 include issues around discrimination against women and girls, violence against women, child marriage and female genital mutilation, unpaid care work, women's participation in leadership, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights to economic resources, and access to technology.

Even though all SDG targets are relevant to the fisheries sector to some extent, those that are especially relevant are: equal rights to economic resources (Target 5. A); recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work (Target 5.4.); women's effective participation (Target 5.5); eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls (Target 5.2), and enhance use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women (Target 5. B). In this article, I would like to focus on women's rights to economic resources and the need for the recognition of women's unpaid work.

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A fishing village in Tonle Sap, Cambodia: 40-60 per cent of the 1.25 million people who are dependent on fisheries in this Lake area, live below the poverty line

In order to achieve SDG 5 in the fisheries sector, we need to make sure that women have equal and direct access to, and control over, resources, and that their unpaid work is taken into consideration.

In many countries, the incidence of poverty is high among fishers. In Cambodia, 40-60 per cent of the 1.25 million people who are dependent on fisheries and live in the Tonle Sap Lake area, live below the poverty line. The poverty level in fishing households in Sri Lanka was estimated at 21 per cent and was considerably higher than the national poverty level of 13 per cent in 2003-04. In India, the Marine Fisheries Census estimated that 60 per cent of the fishing community lives below the poverty line. The 'Blue Revolution' of the 1960s-70s increased mechanization in the harvest of fisheries, and this in turn increased inequalities within fishing households.

This has happened in certain countries. For example, in Costa Rica, women mollusc gatherers were given official recognition and legal rights to gather mollusc, and were provided with social security as shellfish harvesters. Research has also shown that providing credit as well as refrigeration and storage facilities for women fish processors/traders also gives women stronger negotiating power.

Women's access to economic resources and opportunities is closely linked to official and social recognition and support for their unpaid care work. Hence, just providing resources is not sufficient to ensure that women can make maximum use of the opportunities and access to resources. A holistic approach is necessary. For example, a study of Cambodian fish traders found that the women traders who were unable to expand their trade were those who quit the business for several years to attend to childcare or other care work within the household. Because they quit, they had to start small again when they returned to their trade. Meanwhile, women traders who had continued their business were able to accumulate considerable profit as well as business experience, and become well established in the market. Discontinuation of business (for care purposes) disadvantaged women, and the families that depended on their incomes.

Dwindling fish resources are also pushing fishers to diversify their income sources. A recent study showed how fishing villages in Vietnam are increasing their income by engaging in wage labour and migrant labour. Even though both women and men migrate from Vietnam, men often migrate further than women. Women who are raising small children, and do not have any close family who can take over these duties, are unable to migrate. This decision places them in a vulnerable position, making them dependent on the remittances from their husbands.

Income from fishing is not stable, and can fluctuate enormously. Some days the catch

is good, and some days fishers do not get anything. Women play an important role in ensuring that fishing households have a stable income, often by engaging in activities outside fisheries in the low season. They do fish processing, fish trade, and other income generating activities such as raising livestock, as well as wage labour to stabilize this income fluctuation. However, even though such activities support fisheries and fishing households, since the activities themselves might not be directly related to fisheries, they are often ignored in enumerating women's work in the sector. For example, one study in Thailand showed that when men were not able to fish because of strict implementation of fishing regulations in Thailand, women did other jobs to make ends meet.

A similar situation was noted in Cambodia, where fishing is always one of many diversified sources of income for small fishers. In Cambodian inland fisheries villages, both women and men are engaged in various income generating activities including fisheries. This suggests the importance of examining the livelihood of fishing communities not only through their fishing activities, but through a study of the whole fishing livelihood system, including women's unpaid work—both in the fisheries production as well as care work.

In order to achieve SDG 5 in the fisheries sector, we need to make sure that women have equal and direct access to, and control over, resources, and that their unpaid work is taken into consideration in recording their participation as well as in designing support systems. At the same time, we need to recognize that the fisheries sector will also benefit from achieving SDG 5, since women's higher contribution will lead to higher productivity in fisheries, and women will be able to support the dwindling and unstable income from fisheries, offering crucial support in livelihood transition, when necessary. Whether SDGs are able to be effective or not depends on the national indicators that are developed based on the context of each country, and on the funding priorities to realize the goals. We need to document women's contribution, both paid and unpaid, in and around fisheries to increase visibility, and enable their voices to be heard and influence decision making on issues that affect them.

Acknowledgement of women's unpaid work and ensuring access to resources in the fisheries industry will also ensure that there is substantial progress towards the other goals of SDG 5, including those referring to discrimination and violence against women and girls, child marriage, women's participation in leadership, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and women's access to technology. **■**