

Don't Discriminate against Women

Gender-equitable and sustainable development of fisheries can occur only if there is an end to discrimination against women in fishing communities

More than 30 years after States adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and more than 15 years after the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Platform for Action that set out measures for national and international action for the advancement of women, women of fishing communities continue to face discrimination at various levels.

This fact was deplored by participants of the recent ICSF workshop “Recasting the Net: Defining a Gender Agenda for Sustainable Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities”. The “Shared Agenda” (page 8) from the workshop underscores the need to address this situation urgently and systematically, through action at various levels—by households, communities, fishworker organizations, researchers, civil society, States and international organizations.

Notably, the agenda explicitly links the struggles of women fishworkers for their rights to the struggle for sustainable fisheries—fisheries that have the ability to sustain lives and livelihoods of fishing communities into the future.

The Shared Agenda must be taken forward at all levels. In doing so, measures that have served to recognize and support women’s work must be studied and emulated, based on local realities. Several countries have taken positive steps to address the discrimination faced by women. Brazil, for example, recognizes all women who work in fishing and fisheries-related activities as workers entitled to social security and other benefits, France recognizes women who provide shore-based support to the fishing activities of their partners as ‘collaborative spouses’, and India produces gender-disaggregated data on those who work in fisheries-related activities through a periodic census of marine fishing communities. There is much that other States can learn from such examples.

It is critical to recognize the role of collective action. Indeed, evidence from across the world indicates that where fishworkers are organized, they are able to seek accountability and affirmative action from their governments, and, equally, are able to benefit from such measures. In this context, the need to support and strengthen organizations

in fisheries, including those of women fishworkers, is undeniable. Organization has enabled women to counter various forms of discrimination and violence, including at the household and community level. It has helped question social norms that restrict women’s freedom and mobility, define what is ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’, and circumscribe their ability to participate in decisionmaking.

A critical evaluation of fisheries projects, many of which have explicitly had a gender component, is also needed, for possible adaptation and replication of positive interventions. This is especially important if the benefits of such interventions are evident for large numbers of the poor, particularly poor women.



While individual examples of men or women benefiting are no doubt inspiring, the focus has to be on wider benefits for those who are at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Interventions should have addressed the systemic causes of oppression and discrimination resulting from unequal power relations, underpinned by class, caste, race,

ethnicity, gender and other factors.

Also vital is research on power relations and discrimination, which can shape not only the discourse on gender and fisheries, but also the direction and form of aid and support to fisheries. Researchers need to address the paucity of work on the gendered nature of fisheries, and ensure the practical relevance of their work, including to fishworker and women-in-fisheries organizations advocating for gender-just and sustainable fisheries.

That discrimination, including against women, continues in various forms, is unacceptable. The obligations of States under CEDAW, among the most widely ratified Conventions, and their commitments to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, must be reflected in concrete ways in fisheries legislation, policies and interventions. As the 29th session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) prepares to discuss the steps needed to support small-scale fisheries, it would do well to take note of the proposals for gender-equitable and sustainable development of fisheries contained in the “Shared Agenda”. This must not go down as yet another missed opportunity. ♣