



36 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

An FAO review dated November 2021 of the 2012 Hidden Harvest Report concluded that small-scale and subsistence fisheries provide livelihood to 113 million people, of whom around 40 per cent are women. According to the report, these women are present in pre-harvest (gear fabrication and boat building), harvest, post-harvest (processing and trade), and subsistence fishing. However, their informal and unpaid activities consistently get under-reported.

The work of women in small-scale fisheries can be very varied. While their post-harvest roles are better acknowledged, women's direct involvement in fish harvesting for both nutritional security as well as incomes, is increasingly being uncovered and documented. In India, from the northernmost regions of Jammu and Kashmir, where women fish snow trout and harvest water chestnuts, to its southern most states where, for example, in husband-wife teams, women use gillnets in the backwaters in Kerala or dive to the seafloor to harvest seaweed in Tamil Nadu, women's labour is the backbone of poor, fishery-dependent families. While the fishing practices are varied, they have two common traits: they are traditional to the communities, and they are vital for survival in the subsistence fishing economies.

Women also provide critical support to men in fisheries. The experience of fishing communities from Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar demonstrates the significance of women's vital roles, whether it is in maintaining fishing gear or participating in the onshore activities of fish sorting, processing and trading. Fish harvest alone, without women's labour in these vital support tasks, would be stripped of value. These activities, however, do not get counted in official fisheries statistics. It requires specialised surveys by the FAO in its 'The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture' (SOFIA) reports to reveal that women's work on the aggregate is nearly half of all work in the small-scale fisheries.

While the challenges that women face are theirs alone, often the burdens of men and families also fall upon women's shoulders. A study in Philippines documented how women equally suffered when the menfolk, be they husbands or sons, faced harassment and exploitation aboard sea vessels. When men suffered losses, or were denied wages on various pretexts, women had to bear the burden of keeping the family afloat with their earnings. They could not afford to buckle under, given the responsibility they had of managing the household and its needs. The experience of several fisheries communities during the COVID-19 pandemic was further testimony to women's resilience in facing up to adversities.

The resilience of women fishers does not stop with adversities alone. They are also often innovators and entrepreneurs. In the coastal villages of Kuching, Sarawak, women without any formal qualifications run food businesses, survey market prices and manage their fish trade. They have proved that with some public support they can be the agents for change in their small fishing communities. We come round here to the central issue: the role of women being made invisible in all enumeration of fisheries statistics, and therefore their absence largely from the planning agenda for the states. In a world riven by strife and inequality, vulnerable communities suffer the most; women in these communities are the ones who need to be empowered to play leadership roles. This is an important message for consideration in this March edition of Yemaya. ❏



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