

The impact of fisheries development and globalization processes on women of fishing communities in the Asian region

Chandrika Sharma¹

Adapted from: Asia Pacific Research Network, 2004. <http://www.aprnet.org/journals/8/v8-2.htm>

Introduction

This paper looks at the impact of fisheries development and globalization processes on women of fishing communities in the Asian region and the responses of women of these communities to these developments. Given the lack of information or statistics on the issues involved, the paper proposes areas for future research. It is divided into the following sections: (1) Fisheries in Asia (2) The role of women in fisheries in Asia, (3) Impact of fisheries development and globalization processes on women of fishing communities, (4) Women's participation in organizations, (5) A feminist perspective on fisheries: a need for clarity, and (6) Important research issues.

Fisheries in Asia

Fishers and fishworkers

Millions of people depend on fisheries for a living in the Asian region and undoubtedly, the sector is a major source, of employment, income and food security. Majority of these are small-scale, artisanal fishers eking out a living from coastal and in-shore resources. Official figures do not include those involved in other fisheries-related activities, such as marketing, processing, net-making, boat building etc. A conservative estimate would, therefore, place the total number of people involved in fisheries-related activities in Asia at about 150 m.

Fisheries and fisheries development

Important fish producing countries in the region include China, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, India, Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. In 2001, nine Asian countries were among the top 20 countries in terms of production from marine capture fisheries. Attracted by the possibilities of higher foreign exchange earning, countries like Thailand, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia provided incentives to export-oriented intensive shrimp culture. Government initiatives, along with higher earnings potential, prompted numerous coastal farmers to shift their production from rice to shrimp.

Cultured shrimp made up 70 per cent of the total yield produced in 1999.

At the same time, the aggressive economic growth in other sectors being pursued over the last couple of decades has had consequences for the fisheries sector. For example, an Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) study in 1992 identified the following among the main marine environmental problems in the region: (i) pollution and/or siltation of coastal waters from industrial effluents, domestic sewage, and agricultural and surface runoff; (ii) pollution of some regional seas and straits from sea traffic operations, and from mining and oil exploration and exploitation; (iii) destruction of sensitive coastal ecosystems, such as mangroves and coral reefs, through cutting, reclamation, conversion, exploitation, and pollution.

Exports are mainly to markets in Japan, EU and the US. For developing countries in Asia and elsewhere, fish trade is clearly a significant source of foreign exchange.

The role of women in fisheries in Asia

Women take on a range of work within the fisheries and within fishing communities, in Asia and elsewhere as outlined in Table 1.

In general, while the exact nature of the work of women differs by culture and region and between rural and urban areas, the common factor is that it is rarely seen as 'productive'

The manner in which development impact on women engaged in fisheries-related activities, women of fishing communities and women who are workers in processing plants are discussed below.

Women engaged in pre-harvest work such as net-making

Traditionally, nets were woven locally using cotton yarn or other natural fibre. The introduction of synthetic yarns and net-making machines has led to

Table 1. Women's range of work within the fisheries and within fishing communities.

As workers within the fisheries (paid and unpaid)	Women may work in fish marketing, in the preparation of bait, making and repairing nets, collecting crabs and shellfish, gathering and cultivating seaweed and algae, in smoking, salting and drying fish, and, in rare case, fishing. They may also work in aquaculture farms. Often ignored is the 'liaison work' many wives of fishermen undertake on behalf of their fishermen husbands, such as dealing with financial institutions for credit for fisheries operations
As workers in processing plants	Women are very active in the processing sector, as either part-time or full-time workers in processing plants, or workers under sub-contracting systems.
As those responsible for the family and community	Women, as everywhere else, are almost entirely responsible for the care and nurture of the family. Where the men stay away fishing for long periods, women run the household in the absence of their husbands.
As workers outside the fisherie	Often, women of coastal fishing communities take on activities outside of the fishery, that give them some form of stable monetary income, since the income from the fishery is inherently unstable and unpredictable.

the displacement of thousands of people traditionally involved in these activities, many of whom were women. In Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, India, for example, the introduction of these machines reportedly led to the displacement of 20,000 women employed in this work at one stroke. (ICSF 1997).

Women engaged in fish processing and marketing activities

Traditionally, women of fishing communities in many Asian countries have been playing important roles in marketing fresh fish, and processing surplus catch for sale at a later date. However, with modernization of the sector, the growth of the industrial fleet and the expansion of domestic and export markets, the situation has fast changed.

Women engaged in gleaning and collection activities in inshore areas and intertidal zones

Thousands of women are working in intertidal areas and inshore zones, collecting crabs, shellfish, seaweed etc. for income and domestic consumption. Their work and incomes are rendered highly vulnerable by increasing levels of pollution and destruction of coastal habitats.

Women responsible for the family and community

Women of fishing communities have crucial roles in the care and nurture of their families and communities. Artisanal and small-scale fishermen allege that non-selective fishing deplete and degrade resources and that large catches by large fleets depress market prices. For women of fishing communities, this has often meant a decline in the income available to run the family. And finally,

there are many cases where fishing communities have been uprooted and displaced, or face displacement, to make way for 'development' (industry, urban growth, tourism...). Ironically, even as fishing communities are victims of environmental degradation, they are now increasingly victims of conservation efforts.

Women as workers in processing plants

Exports markets are highly competitive and the Asian region, with cheap labour and relatively good access to resources, tends to enjoy a competitive edge. At one level, fish processing plants provide employment to thousands of workers, particularly women. However, reports indicate that women tend to be employed in low-paid jobs with low levels of job security, often under poor conditions of work with long-term implications for their health, as has been reported in India (Nishchith 2001).

Women's participation in organizations

At a recent meeting of fishworker organizations (FWOs) and NGOs in the Asian region held in Thailand (Sharma 2002), it was noted that in most countries of the region, efforts at developing fishworker organizations are relatively recent. It was further noted that even where fisherfolk have organized, women are often not part of such organizations. In some cases, where women have organized and have been given the space to represent their interests within FWOs.

Important research issues

Given this background, future research, should, in the final analysis, lead to a better understanding of women in the fisheries sector and to policy out-

comes that support not only women in the fisheries sector, but a form of fisheries development that is more sustainable and equitable. The following research areas are proposed:

Accurate data

There are no accurate statistics on women's roles in fisheries in any developing country. The starting point of any data collection exercise must change: rather than asking 'do women of fishing communities work?', the starting question has to be 'what work do women of fishing communities do?'. This can provide a holistic picture of the time women put in and the problems they face. It will also clearly indicate that, through their close interaction with the coastal ecosystem and through their work fishing, collecting water, firewood, fruits etc., women are likely to have a broader 'ecosystem perspective' and they have a lot to contribute in bringing ecosystem considerations into fisheries management.

The landing centre

Research on the work women are doing in landing centres, the niches they occupy, the problems and competition they face, the organisations they are part of, and how things have changed over time, would bring out also the dynamism of women in coping with the massive changes they have had to deal with over the last 2 decades. It would provide useful information for policy initiatives.

The market

Research in this field will assist in the understanding of the role women play in fish marketing and the problems they face in transport, in accessing market facilities, in accessing credit, etc. This will also help throw light on marketing chains for different kinds of fish, and the role that women play in these different chains.

Women within organisations

A better understanding of whether women are part of organisations within communities and at the regional and national levels, the constraints they face in participation, the different perspectives they have brought in, and ways in which their meaningful participation can be strengthened, would also be highly relevant. As would a better documentation of the responses of communities to adverse developments, and positive initiative taken by them.

Women in fish processing plants

Given the importance of the sector in the Asian region, it would be useful to study the conditions of work in the sector, wages and gender-based differentials in wages, the changing nature of employment (e.g. increasing casualisation), the impact of changes in technology and markets etc.

Women in aquaculture

there is no information about the level of employment and conditions of work in aquaculture units in the region. Given that aquaculture is growing at such a rapid pace, it is important to look at this dimension and to monitor trends

While all these remain important areas for research, the paper demonstrates that the importance of process cannot be over-emphasised. Any research should be undertaken in a participatory manner, in ways which clearly benefits and empowers those at the community level, particularly women.

References

- ESCAP. 1992. The state of the environment in Asia and the Pacific 1990. ESCAP, Bangkok.
- ICSF. 1997. Women first: Report of the women in fisheries programme of the ICSF in India. Volume 1. (Women in Fisheries Dossier Series No. 2). International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, Chennai, India
- Nishchith V.D. 2001. Role and status of women employed in seafood processing units in India. In: Williams et al. (ed). International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries, ICLARM Contribution No. 1587, Manila.
- Sharma C. 2002. Coming together. International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, Chennai, India. Yemaya #9.