

Moving the gender agenda forward in fisheries and aquaculture¹

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In 2012, the Asian Fisheries Society published 21 papers in a Special Issue (25S)⁹ of *Asian Fisheries Science* journal. The papers were written by presenters at the 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3),¹⁰ at the 9th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum in April 2011.

In producing the AFS Special Issue, we felt a mix of optimism and pessimism: pleasure because of the breadth and depth of the knowledge presented, optimism because of emerging interest in gender in aquaculture and fisheries, and pessimism because gender in aquaculture and fisheries research has not progressed as strongly or as rapidly as it should. Despite the evidence that women play large, though undervalued, and functionally critical roles in fish supply chains, the slow progress in advancement of women reflects a global lack of priority and resources, evident also in Asia, to women and gender issues.

Let us explain the causes of our pessimism and optimism through three observations.

Women and gender are not on the agenda

First, we observe that women and gender topics are “not on the agenda” in aquaculture and fisheries. Research and action on gender receives very little support from governments, universities and external funders such as development donors and nongovernmental organizations. In Asia, a few exceptions stand out. One is the Mekong River Commission Fisheries Program and its 4 member countries fisheries departments that, for 12 years,

have conducted a Mekong basin-wide Network for Promotion of Gender in Fisheries. Another exception is the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, which has the biannual *Yemaya* newsletter on women in fisheries, takes up women’s issues in its regional partners and recently held a global workshop on the gender agenda in fisheries (ICSF 2010). The *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* also persists thanks to the efforts of its editor, authors and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

The lack of attention to women and gender starts in policy-blindness. Women and gender issues are missing from key global normative fisheries (and aquaculture) products such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (FAO 1995) and many of its succeeding instruments and technical guidelines (Williams 2010). These instruments reveal how aquaculture and fisheries are presently framed, and hence the priorities addressed — gender is not visible.

Without focus and resources, progress is difficult and slow. Many of the authors in the Special Issue are conducting gender studies as a sideline to their main work and some have entered the field as non-specialists who have realized the need, in the course of other studies.

We have also witnessed the phenomenon of women and gender specialists in social science research departments moving on from studying aquaculture and fisheries to studies in other sectors or overarching themes such as climate change and women’s mobility. Some among us are part of this

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⁹ <http://genderaquafish.org/events/gaf3-2/contents-asian-fisheries-science-25s/>

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shift. In order to flourish, any field of research and education needs resources: researchers, funds and students. Like other researchers, women and gender researchers and students “follow the money”. Because gender and fish sector funding is minimal, some of the most significant researchers in the field have moved on to study gender in other fields.

To compound the problem of low support, many researchers and activists have been disheartened because their advice was rarely sought, or accepted and used when given. For example, inshore fishers, and especially women, warned that the North Atlantic cod stocks were in decline years ahead of Canadian government recognition of the crisis (Neis 2000; Grzetic 2004).

Development assistance agencies often fund projects and then use the results as the basis for new projects. Few aquaculture and fisheries projects, however, have gender components and hence development assistance agencies are providing little support to gender in aquaculture and fisheries.

The lack of attention to gender in fish sector projects could be partly compensated by borrowing from gender work in other rural sectors. The quantum of gender and agriculture work seems to be increasing since the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) highlighted the “gender gap in agriculture” in its State of Food and Agriculture report (FAO 2011). The report also touched lightly on aquaculture and fisheries. Following this report, more attention to women in agriculture is evident among the multilateral development agencies such as FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Bank. In March 2012, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research and FAO and other international professional bodies sponsored the first Global Conference on Women in Agriculture.

We cannot take for granted that this flurry of attention to women in agriculture will also stimulate more research and action on aquaculture and fisheries. It is, however, a positive development that should be harnessed. Choo et al. (2008) pointed out that fisheries and aquaculture are influenced ultimately by global trends in development.

Other signs of optimism closer to aquaculture and fisheries include that several mainstream institutions are beginning to include gender work and strategies in their programs. For example, the CGIAR recently adopted a new research programme on aquatic agricultural systems. The programme focuses squarely on food security and integrated livelihood for the poor. It is an innovative and ambitious research programme that has a strong focus on gender mainstreaming. One of the six research themes is on gender equity.

Such a strong gender focus is possible because the programme moved away from component crops and fisheries and focused on integrated livelihood systems. By looking at the system that women and men are working and living in, rather than looking only at fish, there is greater opportunity to address the issues of gender equity as well as other social issues.

Further optimism comes from the rising interest in value chains in fisheries research. Just because few women go out in large boats to fish, they are often not considered fishers and marginalized in fisheries sector analysis. The focus on value chains puts a new light on women’s role in aquaculture and fisheries, and highlights the importance of post-harvest activities such as trade and processing. This is becoming all the more important because of the regional economic integration, such as in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region.

Women and gender studies in aquaculture and fisheries need multiple approaches

Our second observation is that women and gender studies in aquaculture and fisheries are not monolithic and they will not be addressed by a single discipline or epistemology. This methodological plurality contrasts with the case in technical fields such as fish diseases, stock assessment, hatchery technology and safety at sea. Indeed, considerable differences of opinion prevail over gender research, and even whether “gender” approaches are weakening attention to the very urgent problems that many women, especially poor women, experience in the fish sector (e.g. Biswas 2011).

One of the problems of advancing the gender and fisheries and/or aquaculture field is the difficulty in conducting truly multidisciplinary research. Fisheries biologists realize that they need to understand about the people who are engaged in fish production, hence focus more on gender division of labor in fish production. Social scientists are concerned with social relations and structures as well as livelihood systems without much knowledge of fisheries and aquaculture systems and technologies and fish species that people are engaged with. In order to advance the field, we need to combine both perspectives. For example, the following questions can only be answered through work by multidisciplinary teams.

- With the increased demand for water for agriculture, industry, tourism and fisheries, how much water would be available for fisheries and aquaculture? How much would fisherwomen be able to negotiate for water for their own production, giving their weak negotiating power and low visibility in the sector? How

would that affect the fish availability for fishing or fish culture households? What are alternative livelihoods or possibilities of up-grading women and men's present positions in aquaculture and fisheries?

- How would fish production technology help in improving food security? For whom? Why?
- With cross-border trade facilitated, what are the implications for food security for the poor? How would aquaculture and fisheries play a role in food security for the women and men in poor households? How can poor women maintain access to fisheries resources for their food security? How can women retain or gain access to fish for processing and sale against other competitive buyers?

Another problem of gender and fisheries research is that when we look at only the gender division of labor, we often cannot deny that women are playing a marginal role vis-à-vis men. However, when we look at the dimension of household food security and livelihood, we find that women contribute as much and sometimes more than men. What are the species available for women to catch and trade, or to be consumed at home? What are the aquatic resources available for poor women for processing and trade? What are the technologies available for them? What bargaining power do women have in the value chain, including rights to exploit fisheries resources? Gender and fisheries needs to take a more systems approach in order to reveal the gender relations and problems that women face in fisheries where collaboration between social science and fisheries biologists is fruitful.

Compared with fisheries, gender and aquaculture needs a totally different framework of analysis. The issues for gender and aquaculture are more similar to issues in gender and agriculture or gender and enterprise development. Hence, basic gender analysis concepts such as gender division of labor and access and/or control over resources provide us considerable insights into the gender issues in gender and aquaculture. Thus, looking at fisheries as a system and aquaculture as a household economic production activity, existing methodologies can be expanded into the field of gender in aquaculture and fisheries.

Gender in aquaculture and fisheries studies and outreach need better foundations

This leads to our third observation, which is that much work is needed to develop and disseminate better conceptual frameworks for studies on gender in aquaculture and fisheries. Building the new foundations requires the engagement of the more academic researchers and activists who have

been engaged in Asian Fisheries Society symposia, and more besides these. Until more financial and institutional support is available to this field of research, progress will continue to be modest.

Experience has shown that women and gender issues are invisible to many in the fisheries sector and advocacy is required to raise the profile of gender. Credible, dedicated and persistent champions are needed. One initial target of action is to bring about policy changes to engender aquaculture and fisheries because, without this, the mandate and platform for gender focus is lacking.

Above, we commented that many of those doing gender research are not educated in gender research methods. Beyond this small group, most experts in aquaculture and fisheries have no gender education and very little awareness of the issues. Gender training, education and extension are, therefore, needed to reach a wide spectrum of people in aquaculture and fisheries. Basic concepts need to be defined, disseminated and understood; gender disaggregated data should be routinely collected; and research and comparative analysis conducted. With development and broader use of conceptual frameworks for data collection and research design, cross country comparisons would become possible. They are presently impeded by statisticians and researchers using different approaches.

Conclusions

In summary, we find that women and gender studies are progressing only slowly in aquaculture and fisheries because they: 1) are not on the policy agendas and action plans and therefore minimal resources are devoted to them; 2) are not amenable to a single epistemology and different visions compete; and 3) require stronger conceptual foundations to be developed, disseminated and used.

Although the field of gender in aquaculture and fisheries is still under-researched and under-funded, an increasing number of people and institutions are interested in it. As presently comprised, gender in aquaculture and fisheries researchers form a loose network, comprising biologists as well as social scientists from several disciplines, placing interested parties in a good position to coordinate innovative research with a multidisciplinary approach. The collection of papers in this volume shows that we have become quite successful in visualizing women's contribution to fisheries and aquaculture. We have also been able to come up with a more structural analysis by looking at value chains and institutions, dealing with the relations of women in fisheries and aquaculture, and other actors. The field now faces more challenges due to climate change and economic integration, which would require us to do a more nuanced analysis

on different contexts and ecological, economical, political and cultural systems. We also need to highlight the issues of intersectionality — the axis of analysis is not only about women and men, but how the other factors such as class, age, ethnicity, race, caste, and religion all come into play to define and condition the relations that one would have in fisheries and aquaculture systems. We hope that in the near future, we will be able to report very optimistically on progress in gender in aquaculture and fisheries research and development.

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