

Women in fisheries in Asia: 1978–2016¹

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From fisherwomen's struggles against unfair taxation in the 1970s in India to organising global programmes to forge common understanding and strategy, women in fisheries in Asia have come a long way

This article on the milestones achieved by women in fisheries in Asia-Pacific is based on existing material and contributions from several colleagues. Many more milestones are still to be added, but the following gives a flavour of what has happened. The milestones summarised here are varied – sometimes uplifting, often depressing, some big, others small – but all indicative of women fishworkers' struggles. The milestones are just a start and are somewhat biased towards research and government agency actions, and contain less than we would like on grassroots action. Part of the lack of grassroots coverage is due to the lack of public visibility, especially on the internet, of women's grassroots groups and actions. Often, grassroots groups are hosted under national fisheries federations and do not have their own identities, websites and secretariats. Therefore, the present version of the Asia-Pacific milestones could be considered a work in progress, and we hope to keep it updated. Your contributions, corrections and comments are welcome.

1978

In Kerala, India, women fishworkers protested against exorbitant market taxes and won the struggle to not pay market tax if they took only one head load of fish to the market.

1982

In Kerala, India, women demanded the right to use public transport to take their fish to market. Without access to transport, women had to walk a long way, sometimes up to eight or ten kilometres, to and from the market. After two years of discussions with the government, a decision was made to provide special buses for women to take their fish to the market. Eventually, these buses were run by the MatsyaFed (Kerala State Co-operative Federation for Fisheries Development). Initially there were several buses but the numbers gradually reduced as the bus timetables did not respond to the times that women demanded, or too few women used the services. Coordination of the service was poor and the MatsyaFed lacked the will to find amicable solutions. Nevertheless, a couple of buses still travel to the fish landing centres for women to purchase fish and bring it back to the market to sell.

1989

In 1989, women in Kerala, India, were registered separately in the Fishermen's Welfare Corporation so that they too could get the benefits of the cooperatives and the famine-cum-relief scheme which recognised even single women fish vendors.

From its headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia, the Pacific Community (SPC, then the South Pacific Commission) began women in fisheries work, with a focus on women in

post-harvest processing. In 1991, SPC appointed its first Women's Fisheries Programme Officer, but the post was only filled for about a year and then remained vacant until 1995.

In Maharashtra, India, following a petition from women to the Railway Minister by the National Fishworkers Federation, a wagon on the train from Palghar to Mumbai was provided for women fish vendors. This is still operating.

1990

At the suggestion of Dr M.C. Nandeesh, the Asian Fisheries Society (Indian Branch) conducted its first Women in Fisheries in India workshop in Mangalore, India, and published the proceedings³ in 1992.

1993

A Pacific Women in Fisheries Network⁴ was established in Fiji. The network is registered under the (Fiji) Charitable Trusts Act, and is a consortium of fishers, researchers, gender and development specialists and scientists from non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), governmental and regional agencies that share a common interest in addressing the urgent need to strengthen the involvement and improve the conditions of women in the fisheries sector in Fiji. At its height in the 1990s, it had some 60 members in the Pacific region. There was a ten-year lapse of activity due to core members proceeding on professional development stints but it was revived in mid-2013. In 1995, it published 'Fishing for Answers: Women and Fisheries in the Pacific Islands'.⁵ The network now has a full-time coordinator and is currently working closely with the World Conservation Society (WCS) in Fiji.

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³ <https://genderaquafish.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/1992-procs-india-women-in-fisheries-1990-workshop.pdf>

⁴ <http://siccode.com/en/company/women-in-fisheries-network-fiji>

⁵ <http://www.spinifexpress.com.au/fasiapub/fiji/fiji2.htm>

1994

At the instigation of Dr M.C. Nandeessa, the non-government organisation Partnership for Development in Kampuchea (PADEK) and partners organised the Women in Fisheries Cambodia Workshop, and published the proceedings. (Note: For copies of the proceedings, please contact the author.)

1995

At the 4th Asian Fisheries Forum in Beijing, the Asian Fisheries Society and PADEK held a women in fisheries photo competition.

The UNDP Women in Fisheries Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop was held in the Philippines and, in addition to a large volume of proceedings, agreed upon the Iloilo Resolution (UNDP SU/TCDC 1995)⁶ that was sent to the 4th World Conference on Women in Development, held in Beijing, China.

Also this year, SPC started a Women's Fisheries Development Section and appointed an officer to lead it.

1996

PADEK and several national partners held a 'Women in Fisheries in the Indo-China' workshop in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and published the proceedings. (Note: For copies of the proceedings, please contact the author.)

In South Korea, the first meeting of women in fishing villages was jointly organised by five fisheries cooperatives. Women's greater political activity in fishers' organisations was preceded by demographic changes, such as the ageing of the rural population, increasing work opportunities elsewhere, and declining fisheries resources. The work women did in the fisheries was being transformed, with some women even going to sea with their husbands.

1997

The Cambodian Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Cambodian Fisheries Administration (FIA).

The *SPC Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* was launched.⁷

1998

The Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) Symposium on Women in Fisheries in Asia was held during the 5th Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This was the first such event by the AFS and the predecessor of similar events at each of the subsequent Asian Fisheries (and Aquaculture) Forums.

In the Philippines, registration of fisherfolk began to include women, in contrast to the previous practice of recognising only male fishers. The 1998 Fisheries Code (Section 19) provided for registration of municipal fisherfolk by local government units.

In the Pacific, SPC transformed its Women's Fisheries Development Section into the Community Fisheries Section. At this time, in the Western and Central Pacific region, many male fisheries leaders expressed concern that development work that focused on women was not inclusive of all members of the community. By 2003, the Community Fisheries Section had moved even further from focusing on women when it became the Coastal Fisheries Management Section.

1999

Yemaya, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)'s newsletter on women and fisheries, was launched from the ICSF Secretariat Office in Chennai, India. *Yemaya* regularly covers gender issues in fisheries. It has systematically documented various forms of gender-based inequalities. Its articles deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities, including recent research or meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. It also contains life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for recognition of their work within the fishery.

Also this year, the Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Vietnamese Department of Fisheries; and the Lao Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Lao Department of Fisheries and Livestock and the Living Aquatic Resources and Research Center.

2000

Philippines researchers and other experts established the nationwide NGO National Network on Women in Fisheries (WINFISH)⁸ to maintain the visibility of the women and gender agenda in agency programmes, and undertake research and advocacy work through its biennial conference, training engagements, publications and individual members' areas of influence. WINFISH was officially incorporated in 2001.

The Thailand Women in Fisheries Network was established by the Thai Department of Fisheries.

The Mekong Network for Gender Promotion in Fisheries Development (NGF) was formed, as a regional forum for the networks already established in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The NGF has been continuously supported by the Mekong River Commission's Fisheries Programme in organising its regular annual meetings for updating of network activities implementation and sharing experiences on gender awareness and mainstreaming activities implemented in the four member countries.

In Australia, the national Women's Industry Network Seafood Community (WINSOC)⁹ was formed and incorporated as a registrable Australian body. WINSOC is the only national organisation in Australia that represents the women of the seafood industry. It provides a unique network role for tapping a valuable resource of Australia.

⁶ UNDP SU/TCDC. 1995. Regional workshop on the role of women in fisheries development in the Asia-Pacific, Report of proceedings, Iloilo, Philippines.

⁷ <http://www.spc.int/coastfish/en/publications/bulletins/women-in-fisheries>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006287505655&fref=ts>

⁹ <http://winsoc.org.au/>



2001

The Asian Fisheries Society Symposium on Women in Global Fisheries was held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, as part of the 6th Asian Fisheries Forum. After this conference, the organisers decided to broaden their theme to 'gender and fisheries (and aquaculture)'.

In Bangladesh, the government passed a law prohibiting harvest of wild shrimp post-larvae (PL) from coastal river mouths. More than a decade later this law, driven by conservation considerations, was to have unintended gender consequences when it was finally policed. In 2015, with the help of the Navy and Coast Guard, PL gears and traps were destroyed. Some 400,000–500,000 PL collectors living in coastal slums lost their livelihoods, leading them to migrate to inland cities and towns, even though they lacked the skills and capital to prosper there. Women and children have been particularly affected. They now urgently need new livelihood options.

2002

At SPC, the European Union funded the PROCFish project on coastal and invertebrate fisheries. By the time this project finished in 2009, it had collected and analysed a large volume of gender-disaggregated catch and fishing participation data. The final report of the PROCFish project is available on the web.¹⁰

2004

The Asian Fisheries Society First Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF1) was held in Penang, Malaysia, at the 7th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum.

2005

In 2005 in Indonesia, the fisherwomen's cooperative Puspita Bahari¹¹ was initiated to change the marginalisation of women. Puspita Bahari works with the community to educate about gender equality and income-generating activities.

2006

With the increasing feminisation of the Bangladesh fishery sector labour force, especially the shrimp and aquaculture segments, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) began a capacity-building programme for factory workers and managers. Through the programme, over several years, UNIDO produced a training manual, and carried out training of trainers to develop master trainers, and gender-focused training for factory workers in most of the operating factories in the major coastal districts.

In the shrimp industry in Bangladesh, the Solidarity Center, a US-based NGO working on labour rights, lodged a Global System of Preferences (GSP) withdrawal case against Bangladesh, blaming the use of child labourers and causing Bangladesh to lose its trade preference status. As a result many workers, including many women, lost their jobs.

In Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, the women members of the Maharashtra Fishworkers Union succeeded, after several years of action, to get the government to accept that they had rights and that street and other markets should be protected. Later, the government assisted them to map their markets so that their rights to the public space would be protected, in keeping with the Street Vendors Act of 2012.

In Tamil Nadu, India, a study was undertaken from 2006 to 2015 by researchers at the Central Institute for Brackishwater Aquaculture to gain a picture of rural women in small-scale aquaculture. Urban male migration and other social problems were leading to an increased number of permanent or temporary women-headed households. The nature and extent of involvement of women in aquaculture was found to vary greatly from place to place, and within a place it varied according to caste, religion and position in the family hierarchy.

2007

The Asian Fisheries Society held the 2nd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF2) in Kochi, India, at the 8th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum.

2009

The Government of the Republic of the Philippines proclaimed Act No. 9710, 'An Act Providing for the Magna Carta of Women' – landmark legislation that was enacted in March 2010. Its provisions address rights, benefits and the role of women fisherfolk especially in coastal communities.

2010

The 2010 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO)– Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) Global Aquaculture Conference in Phuket, Thailand, included a gender-themed paper for the first time, 'Sustaining aquaculture by developing human capacity and enhancing opportunities for women'. The resulting Phuket Declaration called all to 'support gender sensitive policies and implement programmes that facilitate economic, social and political empowerment of women through their active participation in aquaculture development, in line with the globally accepted principles of gender equality and women's empowerment.'

At Mahabalipuram, India, the ICSF held a global workshop 'Recasting the net: Defining a gender agenda for sustaining life and livelihoods in fishing communities'.¹² This was a defining event and its comprehensive report was very important as an input to the consultative processes of the Small-scale Fisheries Guidelines, adopted in 2014.

The Spain–FAO Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (South and Southeast Asia) (RFLP, 2009–2013) began its gender element, working on normative products and projects in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.

¹⁰ https://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Reports/PROCFish/PROCFish_2010_Regional_Report.html

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Puspita-Bahari-1090161124347159/timeline>

¹² <https://www.icsf.net/en/proceedings/article/EN/111-recasting-the-n.html>

2011

The Spain–FAO RFLP produced the manual ‘Mainstreaming gender into project cycle management in the fisheries sector’.

The Asian Fisheries Society 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF3) was held in Shanghai, China, as part of the 9th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum. Back to back with this event, FAO held a ‘Workshop on future directions for gender in aquaculture and fisheries: Action, research and development’. This workshop subsequently led FAO to undertake an internal stocktaking and planning exercise on ‘Mainstreaming gender in fisheries and aquaculture’.

In South Korea, the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives adopted a Charter on Fisherwomen. The Federation of Korean Fisherwomen was launched under the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives.

2012

Arising from global FAO promotion of gender awareness in food and aquaculture, and also from the GAF3 events of 2011, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research undertook internal planning and produced the ‘Gender in fisheries roadmap’¹³ for India.

2013

The Asian Fisheries Society 4th Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF4) was held in Yeosu, South Korea.

In South Korea, 39 regional unions had a membership of 7,702 fisherwomen. The Female Farmers and Fishers Act was passed to help improve the status of fisherwomen; the act protects women’s rights and interests, and gives the women professional status. State and local governments supported the political, economic, social and cultural development of fisherwomen’s skills. The act also established a comprehensive policy to improve the quality of life, and provided financial support. Fisherwomen’s technical training was developed, and producer groups supported. Fisherwomen’s participation in decision-making has since improved, along with women’s status in fisheries.

In the Philippines, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) drew up a Comprehensive Gender Mainstreaming Program that integrates the gender dimension in its structures, policies, procedures and culture with gender equality as a goal. BFAR reconstituted the Gender and Development Focal Point System and has an active Facebook page¹⁴ promoting news of its gender equality activities.

2014

In 2014 in Bangladesh, following the disastrous Rana Plaza (garment factory) building collapse in 2013, the International Labour Organization (ILO) took over the fish-processing factory work initiated in 2006 by UNIDO. For the shrimp factories, ILO initiated health risk assessment training and the UNIDO BEST project started occupational health and safety training.

Also in Bangladesh, the Labour Laws 2006 were amended in 2014. Over 80 provisos were changed with the aim to provide better treatment of women workers. Explicit labour rules were enacted in 2015 for the first time.

In Indonesia, 2014 saw a drop recorded in female employment in fisheries with 14.5 million women found to be working in fisheries-related jobs, down from the 2008 figure of 16 million. This drop was attributed largely to industrial modernisation and mechanisation.

The NACA-USAID MARKET gender project in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam was launched. This was the first gender project of the Network of Aquaculture Centers in Asia-Pacific. It was finalised in 2015.

2015

From 2015 in Bangladesh, the Solidarity Center (SC) ended nine years of lobbying against the shrimp industry and began to engage with the shrimp processing factories. SC started running factory-based training for the shrimp processing workers. Of 50,000–60,000 workers in the Bangladesh fish and shrimp processing factories, the UNIDO, ILO and SC programmes have trained 7,500 people in labour rights.

In Manila, Philippines, 14 civil society organisations from Southeast Asian countries met in the Regional Workshop on Management of Community-based Coastal Resources. The workshop discussed the importance of women’s roles and the need to protect their rights in small-scale fisheries and coastal resource management.

¹³ <https://genderaquafish.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/gender-in-fisheries-final.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/bfargad.ph/>

