

Heading towards the mainstream from the margins¹

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Change takes time and its direction can meander towards the desired target, or not. I want to reflect on the journey that the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) has taken so far towards making gender in fisheries and aquaculture, with all its angles and complexities, a mainstream topic on its programmes.

AFS, the pre-eminent and mainstream fisheries and aquaculture professional society in Asia-Pacific, was created in 1984 and soon (1986) established a major and comprehensive triennial forum, the Asian Fisheries Forum (now the Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum, see www.9afaf.org). Along with the Forum, several national chapters (India, Japan, Taiwan); specialist networks, e.g., fish health, social science; and thematic conferences, e.g., cage culture in Asia; and a scientific journal, *Asian Fisheries Science*, have established the interests and themes of AFS.

Starting at the margins

In 1995, a photo competition, organized by PADEK of Cambodia, highlighted graphically the presence of women in fisheries. Following this, in 1998, a new programme theme was introduced — women in fisheries — via the International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries.³ This symposium was treated very seriously by the leaders of the society and also the hosts in the Thailand Department of Fisheries. Indeed, in his welcome remarks, the Director General of the Department pointed out that one third of his staff were women. As the proceedings reveal, the papers were stimulating; many were descriptive but others were more analytical. One of the more memorable aspects of this event was the reaction many of the predominantly male attendees at the Forum. The most common question the organisers, male and female, received, was “can men attend?” Social science topics were not new to the society but somehow this topic seemed to be controversial. The implication was that this was not a totally serious issue and would only be of interest to women. I am pleased to point out that the idea was actually the initiative of a man, Dr M.C. Nandeesh, who then was working on aquaculture development in Cambodia and had previously organised a Cambodia Women in Fisheries Conference (1994) and an Indochina Women in Fisheries Conference (1996).⁴ I am also pleased to report that many men as well as women attended the 1998 symposium and took an active part in the discussion.

Holding the course

Undeterred, even emboldened, we went global, with the 2001 Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries. The papers, largely contributed rather than invited, were still predominately descriptive, but slowly more research and analysis were entering the discourse. We were and still are trying to find our feet in terms of a firm logical base. Some contributors are driven by feminist and human welfare considerations, others by theme-based research on topics such as small-scale aquaculture, or fish trade and women. Women’s development, fisheries and aquaculture development, and regional and national comparisons were all addressed. One important result was that a paper by Mary Huang was one of the first in the world to raise the issue, later confirmed in more detailed studies, that unfortunately HIV/AIDS was a prominent disease in many fishing communities. This dimension had not been picked up, even by countries taking AIDS action seriously, but it now is.

From “women in” to “gender and” fisheries

Our next symposium, the 2004 First Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries, attempted to make the transition from “women in” to “gender and” fisheries.⁵ We also attempted to attract a greater research focus to get beyond the more descriptive work. Women in seafood processing became more

¹ The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the author and do not represent the policies or positions of any of the organisations referred to.

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³ <http://genderaquafish.org/resources-3/>

⁴ Nandeesh M.C. and Heng N. (compilers). 1994. Women in Cambodian fisheries. Proceedings of the National Workshop on Women in Fisheries. Bati Fisheries Station, PADEK, Cambodia. 128 p.

Nandeesh M.C. and Hanglomong H. (eds.) 1997. Women in fisheries in Indo-China countries. Proceedings of the seminar on Women in Fisheries in Indo-China countries. Bati Fisheries Station, PADEK, Cambodia. 167 p.

⁵ <http://genderaquafish.org>

prominent as the whole fish supply was increasingly taken into account. Thoughtful papers on women's economic contributions, the gender dimensions of fisheries management and power and empowerment aspects of aquaculture development were explored.

The 2007 2nd Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries continued many of these themes, with a strong emphasis on reaching women through micro-finance, self-help groups and development projects. The globalisation dimensions and marketisation of fisheries received attention, as did the lack of access of many women to training to access new aquaculture technologies.

Throughout this period of more than a decade, the fisheries and aquaculture sector had made little progress globally in addressing gender issues, despite the burgeoning importance of dynamic, high investment supply chains to provide fish to markets across international boundaries.⁶ FAO, especially in Africa, had started to codify good practice on gender in fisheries, but the mainstream fisheries instruments, such as the FAO Committee on Fisheries, paid no attention to the topic. Slowly, this may be changing, however, if the 2010 Global Conference on Aquaculture (Phuket, September 2010) is any barometer. This decadal event had an Expert Panel that partly addressed gender issues (Expert Panel VI.3 on Human Capacity Development and Gender Issues) and its report was well received at the Global Conference.

The 3rd Global Symposium on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries at the April 2011 9th Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum promises to be a well-attended and lively two-day event. It will break new ground in terms of breadth and depth of papers, which will be reflected in the proceedings expected later in the year. In addition, FAO will be holding a focused invitation-only consultation to brainstorm future priorities on gender in aquaculture and fisheries. We remain quietly confident that, along with the new small-scale fisheries declaration, the United Nations' UN Women organisation, and the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers' (ICSF) Casting the Net initiative, we may be seeing a groundswell of support for gender and fisheries entering the mainstream of fisheries.

In the case of AFS, the society's interests in gender dimensions are broadly to help the development of the sector through ensuring equality of access to men and women in professional and industry terms, and giving the sector access to the broadest and best expertise. Individual society members and supporters have more activist agendas that are not incompatible with the broader interests of the society. And although we may sometimes think that AFS has only progressed slowly, though surely, on gender and fisheries, I note that other mainstream professional societies in fisheries and aquaculture have made almost no progress, with the possible exception of the World Aquaculture Society.

⁶ Meryl Williams 2010. Gender Dimensions in Fisheries Management. In: Grafton, R. Quentin, Ray Hilborn, Dale Squires, Maree Tait and Meryl Williams (Eds) 2010. Handbook of Marine Fisheries Conservation and Management. Oxford University Press, New York, p. 72–86.