



# **GENDER POLICIES FOR RESPONSIBLE FISHERIES**

**POLICIES TO SUPPORT GENDER EQUITY AND LIVELIHOODS IN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES**



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**The aim of this policy brief is to:**

**Encourage policy-makers to address gender  
issues in fisheries**

**Present experiences dealing with gender issues  
in fisheries to guide the development  
of gender policies**

**Highlight strategies to improve the delivery of  
gender policies in small-scale and industrial  
fisheries and aquaculture**

## LOOKING BEYOND WOMEN AS PROCESSORS AND MEN AS FISHERMEN

Gender is a concept that deals with the roles and relationships between women and men that are determined by social, political and economic contexts – not by biology. Unequal power relations between women and men in many cultures mean that women are disadvantaged in terms of their control over resources, their access to services as well as in their ability to take advantage of new opportunities and deal with ongoing changes affecting their lives. Gender policies are needed to address these issues.

In the small-scale fisheries sector, development policies have traditionally targeted women as fish processors. Womens' groups typically received inputs such as improved ovens and credit. Fisheries-related development activities have engaged men as exploiting, and sometimes managing, resources whereas women have been excluded from planning 'mainstream' fisheries activities. To date, the implications of women's lower status in relation to men for achieving positive and sustainable change have not been examined in policy-making, although the repercussions on the social and economic outcomes of such policies are significant.

Ignoring the complex relationships between women and men as both boat owners, processors and sellers, and wives, husbands, community members and co-workers, may have negative impacts on the livelihoods of those involved. Fisheries resources management must be linked to other dimensions of the fish supply chain, and the people involved in fisheries and affected by policies must be included in the planning process.

Women are vital to the fisheries sector. Fishery and aquaculture production activities around the world provide direct employment and revenue to an estimated 155

million people – a substantial proportion of whom are fish processors and traders, and female. Apart from these more well-known post-harvest activities, women often own and manage fishing boats – and have their own fishing gear. In some countries, such as Cambodia, the Congo and Thailand, they also fish. The sector is therefore heavily dependent on the recognition and inclusion of women's strategies in policy formulation, but they are frequently ignored.



### OVERCOMING THE EFFECT OF GENDER BLIND POLICIES IN NEW MANAGEMENT REGIMES: EXPERIENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

In 2005, the fisheries administration of the Congo agreed with the fishermen of Makotipoko on the Congo river on new measures to protect fisheries resources. For various reasons, women were not included in the discussions and the impact of the measures on the women themselves, their family well-being and their gender relations – as well as the link between capture and processing of the different fish species – were not analysed. Implemented measures led to the banning of some fishing practices used by the women while new ones about which they had no information, were promoted.

Makotipoko community members responded with a gender action plan to address these issues. Under the plan, the effect of new resource management regulations on fishing techniques, fish processing and the livelihoods of those involved will be assessed. Women will receive training in new techniques, including aquaculture, and extension workers will provide services to women as well as to men.

Source: Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme fieldwork, 2005.



## TARGETING AND MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Beginning with the 1975 United Nations International Year for Women, governments everywhere exhorted development agencies to include women in their programmes and to be 'gender-sensitive' in their policies and practice. By the mid-1980s, activities focusing on women had increased and some gender disaggregated data were even available, making women's economic roles and gender disparities in poverty and welfare more visible to policy-makers. Still, women remained marginal to mainstream development while their workloads and responsibilities increased. Government and development organizations that were seen to reproduce gender inequalities in society were encouraged to integrate women's concerns in their programmes, and change the way they themselves operated. Critically, men were also involved in the process. Gender frameworks and assessment tools were designed to support gender planning and to assist in organizational change.

But little changed. Gender mainstreaming requires considerable political commitment including the allocation of gender-specific budgets. In addition, global and even national commitments do not necessarily fit local reality. Norms and rules within the family, community and market, as well as within local and regional organizations also shape the daily reality of women's and men's lives. Effective mainstreaming means that development organizations must address these local realities and link with ongoing efforts to change. They must also support collective action while remaining aware that these local agendas may not always fit with their own and that negotiations may be dominated by powerful community members for whom change is not necessarily advantageous.



## GENDER IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGES IN THE FISHERIES SECTOR

Examining the fishery sector through a gender and development lens means studying the gender implications of ongoing changes in the sector. When categories of women or men are marginalized by change processes, policies are needed to reduce their vulnerability and protect their livelihoods.

### Changes in resource access rights

New institutional arrangements are being created through which access rights can be claimed. Local cultural and social norms exclude different categories of women and men from participating effectively in these new decision-making processes – marginalized, poor women are especially disadvantaged.

#### DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EXCLUSION

**Gender analyses of fishing communities in Benin, Burkina Faso, the Congo, Gabon and The Gambia point to various factors blocking women's participation in new institutional arrangements**

##### WITHIN HOUSEHOLDS:

- family responsibilities and tasks reduce women's availability for meetings
- women's physical movement is subject to social control so that the timing and venue of meetings often limits the participation of certain categories of women
- the time required to participate is costlier for women than men, especially for poorer women, as their participation is made at the expense of carrying out other activities

##### WITHIN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS:

- as women are often less literate than men, their contribution is less valued
- women have little experience in group management and public speaking, and social and cultural norms often support male decision-making in public gatherings
- women have less access to media (radio and newspapers) and information in general and are therefore less aware of what is going on around them

Source: Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme fieldwork, 2005.

While all marginal groups experience some inequities, these African women reported that men perceive women's participation and increased access to know-how and information will make them less submissive, more independent and able to challenge them. As a result, although women may partake in meetings, they may hesitate to take on leadership positions, to follow-up on decisions and to practice newly-acquired skills.

### Changes in marketing arrangements

Increasing commoditization and globalization has substantial implications for the livelihoods of those involved in the small-scale fisheries sector. Bulk buying of fish and new markets for fishmeal and fish oil for example, as well as the growth of a large wholesale trade, has diminished the role of small fish traders. Women traders have been the first to be displaced. The same is true for fish processors where increased international demand for small pelagic species and availability of formal credit has favoured men, and cast women aside.

### Changes in governance

Globalization of the fish trade also includes an increasing influence of international regulations, such as those covering hygiene and labour. These will have significant local impacts, especially on post-harvest processing activities which in many countries are predominantly carried out by women. To take advantage of these changes, women involved in the small-scale post-harvest sector should be enabled to negotiate for services and seek adequate social protection. This may mean supporting women's organizations or strengthening ways women express their own views within organizations involving both women and men. In the case of new processing factories built for the growing globalization of fish markets, it may entail calling for the adoption of practices designed to protect the most vulnerable labour group, which is largely female.

### Changes linked to aquaculture

The rising importance of aquaculture offers all members of households a chance to benefit from new activities. However, processes often exclude women from gaining access to the information and resources needed to participate in this opportunity. Extension services too often focus on men as household heads responsible for meeting household needs. Furthermore, communities frequently limit participation in new activities based on local rules regarding access to land, ponds and other inputs which in turn reinforce existing social arrangements that constrain the rural poor, especially poor rural women, from improving their well-being.



# WAYS FORWARD: EXPERIENCES IN ADDRESSING GENDER ISSUES IN FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE

Apart from a range of anthropological studies that show the complexity of gender relationships within fisheries, most of the early work addressing gender issues in fisheries has centred on making women visible. The most detailed information is available for aquaculture.

## Aquaculture: increasing women's capabilities, empowerment and social advancement

In aquaculture, linking the earlier “roles and resources” approach to the new “livelihoods and gender relations” approach has widened the perspective in understanding how aquaculture can help women. A major study in the Asia-Pacific region completed in 2001 used this broader view to assess the value of aquaculture policy for ensuring changes in women's status and position, rather than focusing solely on efficiency and productivity.

The following strategies for enabling women to play a more diversified and independent role in aquaculture were proposed:

- Strengthen the capabilities of women's unions and organizations through resource allocation mechanisms and by increasing their management responsibilities.
- Encourage women to participate in other non-land based, aquaculture-related activities such as seed production and the collection and processing of feed and aquatic products.
- Seek relevant collateral for making credit and other resources available to women.



### GENDER ANALYSES IN AQUACULTURE

Studies of women in aquaculture, especially in Asia where aquaculture has long been practiced, show that women's labour contribution is often greater than men's although there is almost a complete absence of macro-level aquaculture-related gender-disaggregated data. Women are reported to constitute from 33 percent of the rural aquaculture workforce in China to 42-80 percent in freshwater and cage culture in Indonesia and Viet Nam. Women's aquaculture tasks, often based near the home, are widely reported to be especially convenient as they fit closely with their existing roles in supporting the household. Since they are undertaken by women, they are often viewed as requiring little skill. This is a major gender issue in aquaculture and leads to women's work being undervalued and poorly rewarded. Women are almost universally reported as absent from decision-making bodies (with major exceptions in China and Thailand). This means they have little control of resources such as ponds, land and water; they lack knowledge, management and information skills, and they have minimal access to knowledge, training and new technologies. At the same time, women carry a huge burden of work (Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines).

## Small-scale fisheries in West and Central Africa: addressing the complexity of gender relationships

The Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP) has adopted an holistic approach to gender analysis, focusing on gender relations throughout the fish supply chain. These analyses provide a more nuanced picture of

gender issues. They emphasise the need to focus on relationships between women and men, and in different institutional contexts.

### NARRATIVES FROM STUDIES CONDUCTED IN BENIN, NIGER AND THE GAMBIA

- The supply chain is dominated by powerful men and women with capital whose actions (bulk buying and hiring the labour of poorer community members) can worsen the dependency of poorer post-harvest groups.
- Poorer socio-economic groups have little control over the chain, have low profit margins and are more vulnerable than wealthier groups to decreases in catch and poor services. Their activities are less profitable: they access poor quality fish and are unable to keep fish fresh since they have no information on ice and marketing. Loans from micro-finance institutions serve more as revolving funds for marketing than investment loans for fishing and processing equipment, and informal and formal credit are risky.
- Female entrepreneurs are more responsible than men for meeting household expenses but are less mobile, less educated and less involved in policy and management decisions than their male counterparts. Poorer women use revolving funds to meet household expenses in periods of poor catch which reduces funds available for business. The majority of female-owned fishery enterprises therefore are small and grow slowly, if at all.
- Women point to hostile male behaviour aimed at keeping them minor players in the sector. Male solidarity between wholesalers and boat owners allows men to monopolize the landed fish and, through male members of the ice plant management committee, to monopolize ice supply. (The Gambia)
- All socio-economic categories rely on family labour, especially women's labour. This limits women's access to education, training and alternative income-earning activities.
- Men excluded from processing and with no independent capital are dependent on relations with female processors. (Benin)

Note: Where no country is indicated the comment applies to all three.  
Source: Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme fieldwork, 2005.

At the household level, gender and livelihood analyses seek to answer the question "Who wins and who loses?". This question has particular relevance among mobile fisherfolk.

**Mobility and migration as a livelihood strategy** Women and men have different social identities and livelihood strategies. For men, migration is their acceptable route to achieving livelihood security in the context of dwindling fisheries resources (seasonal or otherwise). The effects of this migration on the household are complex and do not lend themselves to a straightforward planning scenario.

**Winners and losers?** Men migrate to fish, reducing pressure on household resources. They save and send remittances. Women may have limited access to fish while their social and financial responsibilities often increase. Migration has also been linked with an increased risk of HIV/AIDS, which has implications for household vulnerability.

**Policy responses** A mix of social protection policies is needed to respond to this variety of gender relations and their possible impact. These include:

- strengthening community-based organizations to address the increased social and financial burdens.
- providing skill training for livelihood diversification.
- supporting women's rights to access new opportunities by reducing barriers such as male priorities in land access and memberships costs for joining new groups;
- mobilizing government and non-governmental organizations to provide primary health services to mobile and migrant fishermen, including support for HIV prevention and access to AIDS treatment and care.



## Industrial fisheries: addressing gender discrimination

The gender lens has hardly focussed on industrial fisheries in low income countries. When it has, one sees that large-scale commercial fish processing plants operate as gendered workplaces where women are given irregular and short-term work, often with no health, safety or other protection or benefits that would enable them to combine paid employment with family tasks. Although factory managers may be reluctant to provide the data needed for improving these poor working conditions, the vast increase in the number of codes of conduct developed since the 1990s suggests that there are now considerable

incentives for companies to adopt 'good practice' in order to increase sales and profits from ethical trade and to respond to pressure for corporate social responsibility.

Poor work conditions should be tackled with codes of conduct which must include protection from sexual harassment and work towards enhancing the value of women's labour contribution, increasing self-esteem and thereby contributing to achieving gender equity. Organizations at different levels should ensure that codes of conduct exist and are observed.

### GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN LATIN AMERICAN FISH PROCESSING FACTORIES

**Argentina (Patagonia):** The role of women is most important in fish processing plants...the majority of the women interviewed have unofficial jobs and therefore no medical or social coverage. Only 12 percent of the plants give some sort of training to their staff. More than two thirds of the women interviewed work more than five days a week, and 63% more than eight hours per day. Only a minority of workers have permanent/fulltime employment in the plants where full rights, including social security and maternity leave, are guaranteed by law. The majority of the women identified their household tasks and responsibilities as being problems for them.

**Brazil (Rio Grande and Mar Del Plata):** Managers of the processing plants visited declared that the female work force does create some problems with respect to pregnancies, maternity leave and domestic obligations, which might lead to absenteeism, keeping them away from the work place.

Source: Josupeit, H. 'Women in the Fisheries Sector of Argentina, Uruguay and Southern Brazil'. FAO, Rome, 2004.

## Gender research informs responsible fisheries policy

While it is generally recognized that promoting equitable access to natural and economic resources and social services requires specific actions to deal with gender disparities, more information is needed for an holistic evaluation of the social impacts of a fisheries management plan for example. Unfortunately, fisheries statistics focus

mainly on the fish and data on small-scale and subsistence fisheries are limited. Moreover, statistics alone are not sufficient. Gender-disaggregated data must be complemented with gender relations analysis both within and outside households in order to formulate effective policies.

### A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR GENDER IN FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE

- Conduct comparative and focused studies on the diversification strategies of specific categories of women and men working in different situations in fisheries, the implications of these strategies for resource use and allocation between different household members and their ability to fulfil their responsibilities and make use of opportunities available.
- Analyse the complex and changing patterns of exchange between catch, processing and marketing, and the links these exchanges have with the different economic, social, cultural and institutional realities in which they take place.
- Identify policies and practices detrimental to improving women's status and opportunities.
- Monitor changes in resource management to assess the extent to which existing formal and informal frameworks enable women's agency, voice, claims and opportunities in fisheries to determine priorities for change.

## TIME FOR ACTION ON GENDER : WHO CAN DO WHAT - AND HOW?

Although gender has been on the development agenda internationally for a long time, policy evaporation reflects a lack of political commitment. To link policy with reality – and to maximize the changes initiated in various organizations at different levels (local, national and international) – gender mainstreaming is an appropriate strategy. The SFLP incorporates local gender action planning into its mainstreaming strategy and builds on the understanding that sustainable change requires a framework for action that spans different organizations and institutions located at micro-, meso- and macro- levels. At each level, the development action results in the protection of vulnerable groups as well as the transformation of relations that constrain the ability of women and men to respond to ongoing changes in the sector. Gender awareness training is an essential component of action at all levels.

SFLP envisages a key role for meso-level actors in local gender action planning. Local community-based organizations (CBOs) and grassroots-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are regarded as the relevant groups to undertake the task of identifying specific activities to address the needs of different categories of women and men. Mid-level partners will also play key roles in generating the information needed for the development of effective gender policy, as well as in communicating this information to organizations responsible for the delivery of gender policies in small-scale and industrial fisheries and aquaculture. Finally, while mainstreaming gender within development organizations is important to achieving widespread and sustainable change, women's organizations and groups created to fight for gender equality play a critical role. Firstly, to advocate for policy support on specific issues, and secondly, to make others accountable for supporting activities identified as central to achieving women's empowerment.

### Ministries in charge of fisheries, national governments; international development agencies, private sector organizations can:

- Form cross-sectoral stakeholder platforms for policy dialogue, lobbying and information exchange.
- Support existing national women's organizations lobbying and document changes in gender relations.
- Document fisheries post-harvest contributions to the national economy.
- Monitor policy action.
- Adopt and promote working codes of practice.

#### To help:

- Regulate the informal labour hired in fish processing plants.
- Ensure support for research on gender in fisheries.
- Promote functional literacy for fishing communities.
- Orient fisheries policies to anticipate and address negative impacts of global markets on the post-harvest sector.
- Provide gender-disaggregated data.
- Negotiate for services and adequate social protection.
- Protect vulnerable labour groups.

### NGOs, including women's organizations; local government bodies; private sector organizations can:

- Form partnerships and agree on working arrangements with all stakeholders.
- Build capacity in gender analysis and enhance communication and policy dialogue skills.
- Prepare gender strategy and allocate tasks based on micro-level gender analyses and action plans.

- Monitor, document and communicate action and change.
- Facilitate information generation and exchange between all levels.
- Support advocacy on specific gender issues at all levels.
- Expand and adapt extension services and practices.

#### To help:

- Review regulations for marketing and status of wholesale fishmongers.
- Arrange agreements on modules on business management for functional literacy in fisheries.
- Obtain health insurance for women.
- Communicate information relevant for policy and action to all levels.
- Include women in local development activities.

### CBOs, fishing communities and households can:

- Undertake gender analysis and formulate community gender action plans that challenge existing power relations that create and sustain vulnerability and inequity.
- Participate in dialogue for new marketing arrangements and access to services.

#### To help:

- Negotiate new arrangements between fishermen, processors and traders, and non-local wholesale traders
- Renegotiate informal credit



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