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Women and fisheries: Contribution to food security and local economies

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ABSTRACT

The substantial role of women in fisheries is overlooked in management and policy. Fortunately, it is gaining recognition despite a lack of quantitative data describing the scale of participation and contribution. This work summarizes existing knowledge on women's participation in marine fisheries globally, and estimates their contribution in the Pacific. While women's role varies between geographic regions, in the Pacific, women account for 56% of annual small-scale catches, and resulting in an economic impact of 363 million USD (total revenue: 110 million USD). Recognizing and quantifying the role of women in fisheries has profound implications for management, poverty alleviation and development policy.

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1. Introduction

The term 'fisherman' implies that fishing is performed by men. Closer inspection of fisheries globally, however, indicates that while certain fishing activities are more commonly undertaken by men, others are dominated by women. Women are involved in the capture, processing and sale, as well as finance aspects of fisheries, yet many of these roles have been overlooked and continue to be under-acknowledged in fisheries management and policy development [1–5]. The traditional roles of men and women within societies have contributed toward the notion that women participate minimally in fisheries economies. Men are typically regarded as the providers (i.e., hunters, fishers) while women stay at home and look after the home and family—as the caregivers. Such dichotomous division of labor is somewhat dated, as women have become heavily involved in the workforce in many sectors of the economy, and thus act both as providers and caregivers. Yet, despite technological advances in fisheries, many of the traditional ideologies with respect to gender roles in fisheries have remained relatively un-changed, and governance has failed to recognize the unequal division of labor.

A lack of gender equity in fisheries, particularly in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region [2] is, in part, due to limited gender specific data on fishing activities and the under-representation of small-scale

fisheries in fisheries catch statistics [6]. It is also largely driven by traditional perspectives on what constitutes 'fishing', namely, catching fish using specialized gears (e.g., nets, lines, etc.) from fishing vessels. Provisioning of food via 'collecting' seafood from shorelines, in contrast, has rarely been deemed 'fishing' by male fishers, and tends to fall under 'gathering' and general food provisions, and is/was generally undertaken by women. The implications of this marginalization, which adds to the marginalization of small-scale fisheries [6], are a substantial under-estimate of fishing pressure in coastal areas and an under-valuation of the economic and societal benefits that women in fisheries provide. Consequently, both positive and negative aspects of women's fisheries-related activities are overlooked [7]. The issue is largely that "most fisheries social science research is descriptive, lacking both an analytical framework and documented methodology. Furthermore, the research style and reporting language of the social scientists do not naturally endear them to fisheries managers" [8]. Social scientists have done great services in describing fishing communities and capturing the roles of women in fishing and non-fishing activities. However, their findings are generally not incorporated into policy and decision-making because their data are mostly qualitative and managers do not know how to deal with these data (R. Chuenpagdee, Memorial University of Newfoundland, pers. comm., March 19, 2012). Overcoming this barrier requires a multi-disciplinary approach, which utilizes descriptive accounts, local knowledge and limited quantitative data to derive generalizations of a quantitative nature [6], as well as mechanisms to incorporate these different types of data and knowledge into management and decision-making (R. Chuenpagdee, pers. comm.).

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Until recently, fisheries science and management have been largely male-dominated [9,10]. While many more women are becoming involved in fisheries governance, the majority of high level positions, which include key policy- and decision-makers, continue to be held by men. As women filter into more of the strategic planning and capacity building roles in fisheries, greater gender equality will hopefully be achieved.

Small-scale fisheries play a crucial role in poverty reduction and food security [11], yet are often overlooked and undervalued in management and policy [6,12–15]. By extension, women, as major participants in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, have a fundamental role in development and production. Inclusion of women in the decision- and policy-making process is key to developing appropriate strategies for poverty alleviation and food security in light of changing global conditions. Reducing vulnerability and building resilience in communities at national, regional and global scales requires the consideration of and contribution by women to security [16]. For example, climate change will have a considerable impact on fisheries, both in terms of increased participation in fishing activities, and decreased productivity, due to changing species distributions and generally declining catch potential [17–19]. Women have a fundamental, but under-valued, role in food and nutritional security, however, their contributions to national economies have been largely overlooked due to their dominance in the informal economy [20,21].

This study aims to review much of the available literature and data on women's participation in the fisheries sector in order to assess their contribution to the economy and to food security. First, the study takes a global look at the various roles women have in fisheries and related sectors by geographic region. Then, with a lens on the Pacific region, it estimates the contribution women make to the total fisheries catch and to nutrition, and then analyzes the socio-economic aspects of this contribution—notably participation rates (e.g., numbers of fisherwomen and jobs in the processing and marketing sector) and value to the economy (i.e., direct and indirect value of the catch). The implication of these findings for fisheries management and development policy are then discussed with a particular focus on gender equity.

2. Regional descriptions of women in fisheries

An assessment by the WorldFish Center estimated that women represent between 5 and 73% of the total capture fisheries workforce (including full-time and part-time; fishing and post harvest activities) in nine major fish producing countries [2]. This translates into an average participation rate by women of almost 50% for all fisheries-related activities [2,22]. A recent global estimate of marine fisheries employment (in 144 coastal countries) suggests that approximately 260 million (± 6 million) people are involved in global marine fisheries, including full- and part-time jobs in direct and indirect sectors, men, women and children [23]. Interestingly, Asia and Africa contributed the most to worldwide fisheries employment, likely because of the limited job opportunities in parts of these two continents. In terms of reporting of fisheries catches, these regions are likely the most inadequate. This is, in part, because of subsistence sectors being largely unaccounted for in the official data and artisanal sectors often being under-represented (e.g., Mozambique, Tanzania, Madagascar, Mauritius; [24–26]). Although participation varies considerably from one region to the next, if one were to crudely combine these two estimates, this would mean that 130 million women contribute in some way to global marine fisheries. Women may participate less in catching fish, particularly large fish. However, they have a disproportionately high participation

rate in the collection of invertebrates, the processing and marketing of catch, and they make up the bulk of laborers in seafood processing plants in many parts of the world, such as Asia, Africa and the Pacific [2,27,28]. Yet, in most countries and regions, these contributions are barely recognized.

A recent study on small-scale fisheries summarizes much of the existing data on women and fisheries; however, quantitative information on participation and/or contribution to total catch, was available for only some countries [7]. The considerable body of literature that exists on the topic of women and fisheries, or gender and fisheries, highlights substantial efforts in the past couple decades to raise the profile of women's role in fisheries. Many of these studies point to the lack of gender-disaggregated data in fisheries-related activities and suggest that this is a major constraint to improving gender equity. To establish the global scope of their role in fisheries, the various fisheries-related activities that women are involved in around the world follows.

2.1. Europe

In Europe, women have had a substantial role in the processing sector since the 19th century, particularly important during the peak of the herring fishery [29]. The WorldFish Center estimates the participation by women in the fisheries sector in the European Union to be 6% and 59% for marine fishing and processing, respectively, with a total of over 65,000 women employed in these two sectors combined [29]. Women in this region play a relatively minor role in capture fisheries (aside from gathering shellfish) compared to their role in support, marketing, processing, trading and other fisheries-related activities [30]. The full extent of women's participation in these activities, particularly their role in supporting fishing operations, fisher-families and communities is currently unknown [31,32].

Despite greater gender equality in Europe¹, women are still largely excluded from fisheries management systems, such as fisheries cooperatives and policy development [29]. While in some countries such as France, women legally obtained the right to be fishers in 1963, much of the informal work that they do to support family fishing businesses goes unrecognized. Some legal recognition was afforded to women indirectly involved in fisheries with the adoption of European Council Directive (816/613/EEC) in 1986 on “the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity, including agriculture, in a self-employed capacity, and on the protection of self-employed women during pregnancy and motherhood” [31]. Further EU legislation has extended the legal status of women who assist their husband fishers, with an entitlement to social security and benefits such as old-age pensions, health care and maternity benefits. However, such legal status exists in only some EU member states such as in France, and to a lesser degree in Spain and Portugal [31]. This has allowed some recognition and legal status to women who do much of the administrative work and support roles in fisheries (e.g., book-keeping, mending nets, auctioning fish, etc.) [31]. Women,

¹ In 1995, the United Nations introduced the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which aimed to measure gender equity across countries and regions. GDI is essentially the human development index, adjusted downwards for gender inequity, while GEM estimates the progress in improving women's participation in economic and political life, and in decision-making, based on estimates of women's relative economic income, participation in high-paying positions with economic power, and access to professional and parliamentary positions. In 2010, the Gender Inequality Index (GII) was introduced as a composite index, which combined aspects of the two previously used indices. Europe has the lowest Gender Inequality Index score compared to other regions of the world, meaning that they have achieved the greatest gender equity [33].

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