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Beyond Fish Processors and Caregivers: Women as Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Fish Users

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Abstract

Women's contributions to fisheries are seldom recognised, and when they are, they are often understood from the roles they play in fish processing, marketing, and caregivers of fishing households. This characterisation has influenced the manner in which gender issues have been taken into account in fisheries development projects: women are targeted through post-harvest and household support activities, "low-conflict" interventions that allow them to remain in socially acceptable female domains, without challenging power relations or improving their participation in decision-making. In this paper, we argue that it is necessary to move beyond the perception of women as fish processors and caregivers, by better understanding their access to fisheries resources, identifying their roles and relationships with others, and by acknowledging the benefits of directly involving them in decision-making. Based on a synthesis of relevant literature we develop three categories to illustrate the different ways women access fisheries resources. Women directly involved in fish-harvesting are categorised as primary users, while those that access fish through kinship or other relationships are categorised as secondary users. Finally, women who buy fish directly from fishers or traders are categorised as tertiary users. Drawing on these categories we are able to make a number of recommendations to enhance women's participation in the fisheries sector.

Introduction

The theme of gender equality in fisheries has been in academic literature for over 30 years, with much of the literature directed towards making women's roles visible. The gender division of labour in fishing communities takes diverse forms and has been described in the literature particularly from the light of the importance of women's involvement in fisheries processing, marketing and trade (Williams 2002; Choo et al. 2006; Williams 2008; Weeratunge and Snyder 2009; Williams et al. 2012). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has estimated that, overall, 30% of the people employed in fisheries (harvest and post-harvest) are women (FAO 2012), although this differs very much by country and by sector. Women account

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for half of the workforce in inland fisheries, while in Asia and West Africa, 60% of the seafood is marketed by women. If we take into consideration that much of women's contributions to fisheries go unrecognised, global figures could actually be higher than expected, surpassing 50% of the total workforce involved in fisheries (Weeratunge and Snyder 2009).

Women play very important roles in fish processing plants in developed and developing countries, constituting a major work force in the fisheries sector. Although some women do work on offshore industrial fishing vessels, particularly in the processing floors onboard factory trawlers (Lee, personal observation), they are more active in processing plants on land. In the small-scale fisheries sector, women's roles are also dominant in the post-harvest sector. They process fish by drying, salting, smoking, making fish/shrimp sauce, etc. which they either sell to generate the main or supplementary incomes for their families, and/or use directly for household consumption (Aslin et al. 2000; Tindall and Holvoet 2008; de Pryck 2012). They are also the main caregivers of the fishing households, responsible for food and nutrition security and in many cases, responsible for family finances (Williams 2010). These roles cannot be underestimated as they represent a large burden on women, not only as processors and traders but also as mothers and caregivers of the fishing households, particularly during poor fishing seasons (Kalikoski and Vasconcellos 2012). Furthermore, some women can also be quite active in river and inland, near-shore and subsistence fisheries (Williams et al. 2002; Choo et al. 2006; Williams et al. 2012). Despite the large scale contribution of women in the sector, predominantly in fish processing and marketing, their contribution has been undervalued and they have been largely excluded from decision-making processes and mechanisms, particularly in fisheries governance and management (Tindall and Holvoet 2008).

Moreover, the widespread characterisation of women as fish processors and caregivers has also influenced the manner in which "gender issues*"* have been taken into account up to now, and has resulted often in women being targeted through post-harvest and household support activities and interventions, such as training in processing and marketing, and through grants and credit schemes to acquire processing equipment such as smoking ovens, small implements, cookers etc., or capital funds to buy fish and pay for transport and marketing, and sometimes through livelihood diversification support options such as rearing livestock and handicraft. Such activities can be considered as low-conflict, in the sense that they allow women to remain in the socially acceptable female domain of the household and in their perceived traditional role as processors and marketers. The intention of these activities, therefore, has been to improve women's income, in the hope that (besides having the boxes of "women" and "gender" ticked in the project management checklists), women would benefit from them. However, interventions of such type have rarely been organised to understand and/or question the power distribution and gender power relations within households and communities, which could be considered as going beyond the limits of what a fisheries related project is meant to achieve (Lentisco 2012). Very often, women's lack of power over their own lives inside and outside the household is ignored. Even when gender considerations are included in policy and interventions, all too often the approach used is superficial, and is carried out without a real understanding of women's needs. As a result, little has been achieved to increase women's voices in the sector in general, and their participation in fisheries governance remains limited.

This is not to say that women do not need this kind of technical support. However, failing to recognise the relative absence of women in resource management continues to be an impediment in improving their participation in decision-making, increasing their contribution to policy dialogues and having a direct say over the exploitation of the resources they depend on. These areas are most relevant for their empowerment and without them, any other gains are liable to be lost quickly if external support is withdrawn. But policies and interventions for the development of fisheries seem inefficient to deal with the complexity of gender issues (Harrison 1995), and they often remain, even if unintentionally, gender blind (Brugere 2013). Additionally, it is difficult to find real case studies on women achieving full participation in decision-making in fisheries, as well as in-depth analysis on how gender equality considerations could shape fisheries governance.

In this paper, we will argue that it is necessary to move beyond the perception of women as fish processors and caregivers, by identifying their roles and relationships with others and by better understanding their access and intended use of resources, particularly access to fisheries supplies.

Results

We found it was difficult to identify concrete documented examples where women have been more actively involved in fisheries management. Recent examples are two large projects implemented by the FAO that have aimed at integrating and promoting the role of women, through finding better ways to involve them more directly in fisheries management. These projects, the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme in Africa (SFLP) and the Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Progamme in Asia (RFLP), have carried out numerous studies, workshops and projects where the important roles of women in the fish-value chain have been highlighted and improved, while trying to look beyond women's roles as fish processors (Holvoet 2008; Lentisco and Alonso 2012).

Some authors have highlighted the benefits of women's inclusion in decision-making, which include amongst others: better and increased awareness regarding domestic violence, increased attendance in schools among children, and women's participation in local politics (Gatke 2008; de Pryck 2012). Women are also prompt to organise themselves with the purpose of improving local conditions in their communities (Da Cal Seixas Barbosa and Begossi 2004). It has also been argued that increasing women's control over resources would improve women's bargaining power within the household, increasing not only their welfare but also their children's nutrition and health (Duflo 2011). When women participate in fisheries management, their needs and priorities are better represented, and they tend to pay more attention to livelihood needs such as equitable distribution of resources and other matters related to poverty reduction (Gatke 2008). There are also potential gains for the resource user groups themselves. Westermann et al. (2005) indicated, through their study of 33 rural programs in 20 countries of Latin America, America, Africa and Asia, that having women represented in resource management groups improves collaboration, solidarity and conflict resolution within the groups, and this could also be the case if applied to fisheries. For example, in Cambodia, Gatke found that women were better advocates for transparency and more inclusive participation in fishing communities, and communication and conflict management (Gatke 2008). Better communication, conflict resolution, equitable access,

etc., are drivers that may ultimately translate into better resource management, even if their initial concern was centered more on community cohesion and not so much on reducing their impact over the environment (Funge-Smith, pers. comm.). When considering why it is important to take into account women's involvement in resource management, fisheries managers should certainly contemplate other less evident aspects, such as the work that women do in the household, other subsistence activities (such as shellfish gleaning) or other diversified income activities outside fisheries (WorldFish 2010), as these could also be subsidising men's fishing activities, thereby keeping men fishing for an otherwise unprofitable resource, due to declining stocks or high fuel costs, continuing unsustainable and financially unprofitable practices (Harper et al. 2012). If women were better informed about the impact of such subsidies, then they could also be involved in the search for solutions. There is also a lack of information on the impact of the post-harvest sector, where women's roles predominate, in aquatic resources (Walker 2001). With the limited attention that fisheries organisations and some government agencies give to women's roles in fisheries management, it is no surprise that most of the activities targeting women in fisheries development projects, when present, will focus only on improving post-harvest activities and providing other type of supplementary livelihood support. These activities are certainly important, especially for those women who do not harvest fish, but are involved in fish processing, or are secluded in the household domain away from any type of income generating activities. However, these interventions do little to increase women's voices within the fisheries sector or improve their involvement in resource management.

We argue that a more integrated and equitable approach to fisheries governance and management should give more weight to these considerations by involving women more actively, not only in finding solutions for fisheries resource management, but also empowering women through improved participation in decision-making. On the basis of our research, we consider that it may not only be a more fair and equitable approach, but it may also be the most sustainable avenue for long term use of aquatic resources and their accrued societal benefits.

How do women access fish?

In this section, we will look at the different ways that women access fish. We have classified their access to the fisheries resources when they are directly harvesting themselves as **primary users**, when obtaining fish from members of their kin or others or owning and managing productive tools as **secondary users**, and/or when they buy the fish directly from fishers or traders as **tertiary users**.

Women as primary users

In some small-scale fishing communities around the world, there are women who fish. There is a lack of reliable statistical data to give us a consistent picture of the types of fishing, the gears used, and fishing grounds where women actually fish, and this makes it virtually impossible to quantify and to better understand the type of direct access that women have to fisheries resources. Information about comparative profit margins in the value chain as well as reliable gender disaggregated data on boat ownership or on rights distribution to use fishing grounds remains

largely absent (Weeratunge and Snyder 2009; de Pryck 2012). Noting that only a few women are in fact active harvesters, a number of case studies have looked specifically at fisherwomen (e.g. Lambeth et al. 2001; Branch et al. 2002; Sriputinibondh et al. 2005; Porter et al. 2008; Sopanha et al. 2008) describing the contextual and differential gender division of labour in fishing communities. The aim of most of these studies has largely been a contribution to the "women also fish" discourse, bringing women's roles out of their invisibility. However, they have done little to understand better gender relations and power structures, which would require a comparative analysis of women's roles against those of men, and other women (Weeratunge and Synder 2009). The literature reviewed also suggests that women's participation in the fishing is usually considered as an informal/subsistence activity, with very low profit margins. Indeed, where the fishery activity carried out by women have gained economic significance, in many cases men have come in and displaced the women out of fishing (Porter et al. 2008). There is also a need for more comparative cases that sheds light on different types of women's access to fish (primary, secondary and tertiary), and understanding these differences requires more comprehensive research. In a recent study carried out in Nigeria, by Taiwo Mafimisebi and colleagues, they found that, despite the lower education levels of the women fishers (primary education) compared to the level of education of the marketers (secondary education), the women fishers achieved greater profits than the women marketers (Mafimisebi, Ikuemonisan and Mafimisebi, pers. comm.). The study however did not examine these differences, or compare them with similar data for men. Future comparative analysis should try to explain the factors behind these disparities, particularly between primary, secondary and tertiary users. Other case studies reviewed imply that, despite some women being primary users and having direct access to the resources, there are existing perceptions (including women's own perceptions of their activity) and social taboos that prevent women's participation (Lambeth et al. 2001; Sriputinibondh 2005). The absence of a sense of recognition of their efforts as a professional activity (Pintos 2010), the lack of representation in fisheries organisations, lack of participation in decision-making mechanisms and lack of access to credit, technology, information and capacity building (de Pryck 2012), all are factors that limit women's direct use of fisheries resources and their active participation in decision-making processes in fisheries governance.

Women as secondary users

Acknowledging that there may be some overlap among our categorisation of primary, secondary and tertiary users, our intent here has been mainly to understand better women's access to fish, including the importance of social capital and kinship relationships. In this vein, we have defined women secondary users as those women who use social capital (including, but not limited to kinship relationships) instead of financial capital, to access fish. It could also include women who have direct control over fishing operations, even though they do not fish themselves, either by owning boats or lending money for fishing trips, thus guaranteeing their access to fish. For example, in the Nigerian case study above, the authors indicate that wealthy women owned motorised fishing boats and hired men to fish for them, sharing the catch in an agreed ratio. A similar example was encountered in Ghana, where female entrepreneurs, the fish mammies, emerged and remained in relatively powerful positions in the fisheries sector, by owning canoes and employing men to fish for them and other women to carry out the smoking and trading (Overa

1993). Thus there are possibilities to improve women's participation in the fisheries value chain by taking better control of fishing operations, even if they are not primary users. Women secondary users could be described as those obtaining the raw material from their fisher-husbands or other fishers of their kin, who will provide them with fish or shrimp directly from their share, or their individual catch (Williams et al. 2002), without the necessity of financial capital. These fisher-wives or fisher women will then be in charge of selling the fish fresh or undertaking some type of processing technique before selling it. A part of the catch may be consumed within the household, contributing to food and nutrition security. Women who are single or widowed may face more problems obtaining fish, although in some cases, specific laws may exist to ensure that the fishermen's widows have access to fish (Walker 2001). For example, some Territorial User Rights for Fisheries (TURF) systems in Chile allow widows to get about 75 % of the deceased husband's income for the rest of their lives, while their children are also taken care of until they can support themselves (Gallardo et al. 2011). There are other ways in which women may have access to fish in the absence of financial capital. In some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, poor female fish-traders lacking capital, have access to fish products through transactional sex, putting themselves at risk of HIV/AIDS, other STDs and social exclusion (Merten and Haller 2007; Bene and Merten 2008; Holvoet and Chiambeng 2011).

Women as tertiary users

Finally, we consider tertiary users as those women who use money to buy fish. These women have access to financial capital and buy fish and fish products from traders, the market, or landing sites, taking the catch home for processing, and/or selling it in other areas. Where they will sell their fish will then depend on their own mobility, their access to ice, and to processing techniques for making the product last longer without perishing (Lentisco 2013). There is great scope for improving and supporting women involved in processing and marketing, through capacity building, provision of tools, awareness-raising campaigns, and by facilitating the access to credit. In all these cases, it is necessary to better understand women's practical and strategic needs. For example, the SFLP in Benin found that just by targeting women for microfinance activities, without considering gender relationships, did not in itself have an intrinsic ability to automatically change power relations between women and men (Djoi et al. 2004). Additionally, by being tertiary users of the resources, they may remain dependent of what happens in earlier links of the value chain, particularly the capture/production aspects.

Discussion

Our main finding is that women's participation and access to harvesting activities and assets (primary users) does not directly translate into recognition or access and control over the fisheries resources and to fisheries governance. There are many other considerations to be taken into account, which only emerge by carrying out adequate gender and livelihoods analysis, describing not only the roles of men and women in economic activities, but also other aspects of gender based decision-making, power and power relationships. This also requires a deeper understanding of the cultural and social contexts. For example, women's own perceptions of their work often plays a key factor in improving their roles and participation in fisheries-management - the realisation that

they are able to demand support seems to be a strong step towards their empowerment (Pintos 2010). This stresses the importance of raising awareness about gender equality considerations, not only among fisheries managers, but also among women themselves. Some of the case studies reviewed clearly indicated that, through appropriate support to women's organisations and the recognition of their activities as a professional activity, women's own perceptions about their work can quickly change to a feeling of pride and belonging, to a sense of collective self-worth, which in turn could improve their own wellbeing as well as the management of the resources (Pintos 2010, FAO Project documents in de Pryck 2012). A better understanding and response about how women access fish and fisheries resources may also improve their effective participation in fisheries governance and sustainable resource management. To fully enhance women's roles in resource management (e.g. by being owners of boats and gears, by participating in fisheries organisations and by having a more active role in decision-making at all levels), it is necessary to identify the factors and processes that need to be promoted to start tapping women's potential in fisheries governance. Such approach would not only encourage their empowerment, but can benefit from their experience and expertise to find innovative ways to attain integrated equitable fisheries governance; in addition to targeting the sustainability of fisheries resources, it will aim at the wellbeing of fishing households and communities. Women can and must help in finding and defining these processes and solutions.

There are existing management arrangements, such as co-management, that can actively increase the participation of women in decision-making (Nunan 2006). Focusing on issues of empowerment, accountability, rule making, facilitating access to resources, managing conflicts, increasing organisational capacity and understanding better the role of social capital would all improve the participation of women (Nunan 2006). These processes can be enhanced by the already existing mechanisms that deal with aspects of behavior change, rights, power distribution and gender equality. There is a need to facilitate women's direct access, and direct control over fish as a resource. It is also necessary to discuss new ways of improving their roles as primary users: as fishers (where they fish directly), secondary users: as fisher-wives and fisher-operators (where they access fish through their kinship or other relationships, or are involved in financing fisheries operations), and/or tertiary users; having a better say on the final price of the catch and improving their role in the value chain and enhancing their participation in fisheries governance. For this to happen, the use of resources needs to be understood not only in the context of sustainability, but also of power and power relations, within households and fishing communities (De Pryck 2012).

Conclusions

There is not just one way for attaining women's empowerment and achieving gender equality in the fisheries sector. Unsurprisingly, the academic literature describing women's active participation in resource/fisheries management is quite scarce, making it difficult to draw robust conclusions based on quantitative and qualitative evidence. It is important to note that support for women's post-harvest activities, microfinance, and access to markets, should continue and improve but must be expanded to include other social and cultural aspects, understanding the diverse ways in which women access fish. New interventions in the fisheries sector can facilitate

women's access to productive resources (assets, such as gear, technology, and services, such as technical skills, microfinance, etc.) and not just post-harvest tools, as a way to guarantee their rights of access and control, and enhancing their full participation in decision-making. This could be reinforced by an enabling policy and legislative environment, which mandates the inclusion of women in determining fishing gear and methods and licensing processes, thereby benefiting from a gender perspective. In addition, the relationships of power and influence, between boat owners and boat crew, fisheries officers and fishers, and between them and fish processors and fish-mongers, should be studied more carefully (Nunan 2006). The policy dialogue in the fisheries development discourse also needs to realise that gender mainstreaming is just a mechanism, used to engage in a complex discussion regarding what gender equality means for sustainable fisheries management and governance. The sector is in great need of a better understanding of women's different access to resources, gender relations, power structures and socio-economic distributions (including social exclusion and migration patterns). It is necessary to obtain and document more specific examples describing the processes by which women have been empowered in the fisheries sector and have increased their voice in resource management, learning from these examples and including them in the dialogues aimed at attaining equitable and sustainable fisheries. Fisheries projects and programs should actively seek to include these dimensions in development and not just pay lip service by ticking the gender box.

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