

Edging Up the Ladder: The Women in Ban Thung Maha, Thailand

CRISTINA P. LIM^{1*} AND AMPORN LAOWAPONG²

¹ Ateneo Social Science Research Center, Ateneo de Naga University, 4400, Philippines

² Fisheries Economic Division, Department of Fisheries, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

This paper provides an insight into fisheries conditions for women in Ban Thung Maha, Thailand, a typical coastal fishing community. The studied women made significant contributions through their multiple activities in both the reproductive and productive spheres. Gender inequality was prevalent in the village and manifested in gender divisions of labour, differential access to and control over resources, and access to political and administrative decision-making. The stories of five women showed their struggles against gender stereotyping, marginalization, multiple burdens, subordination and violence against them and their efforts to reverse the trends. With support from the Department of Fisheries, some of them learned to empower themselves, set their lives' directions and help to also empower others.

Introduction

In Thai fisheries, women play active roles. In aquaculture, women are engaged in hatchery and nursing operations, fish farming, aquatic feed production, fish product processing, trading, as “middlemen”, in cold storage facilities, importing, exporting and ornamental fish rearing. In fishing villages, in addition to household chores and nurturing the family, Thai women work alongside men in buying fuel, nets and other supplies, fishing at sea, weaving and mending nets, and selling the catch (Kittitornkool, 1996a; Kittitornkool 1996b cited in Quist and de la Cruz, 2008). They also engage in community activities such as religious functions, funerals, weddings, mangrove reforestation, and artificial reef production. Despite their substantial contributions, women fishers continue to be invisible and rarely recognized. (Kittitornkool, 1996b; Siason et al. 2002). This lack of recognition, partly due to limited research and information, limits understanding fisheries conditions and the success of fishery development efforts (The Technical Advisory Body for Fisheries Management, 2006).

The present study aims to fill some of the knowledge gap by investigating the productive activities of selected women fishers in Thung Maha, Pathew District, Chumphon Province, Thailand, a typical coastal village in Thailand. This paper focused on women's and men's access to

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: shotylim@yahoo.com

and control over resources, access to political and administrative decision-making, the work they were engaged in and their time allocations, the women's views of their work, and their aspirations in life. The stories of five women are featured to illustrate the situation of women in different occupations and to reveal other important issues related to gender.

We obtained most of the information for this paper from focus group discussions (FGDs) with groups of fishermen and women fishers and key informant interviews (KIIs) with the women fishers, processors and traders and with leaders and officials of the Department of Fisheries (DOF) who were knowledgeable about the village. We sought the support of the researchers of the Chumphon Marine Fisheries Research and Development Center of Paknam, Muang, Chumphon in arranging the field visits and facilitating the FGDs and KIIs. We also benefited greatly from the technical reports provided by the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) and the DOF. The data gathering was carried out at varying times in the months of February and March 2009.

Empowerment: a critical aspect of gender equality

A key idea that this paper emphasizes is the importance of women's empowerment in promoting gender equality for sustainable development of fisheries. But what is empowerment? What is women's empowerment?

Defining empowerment requires an understanding of its root word, power. Kreisberg (1992 cited in Page and Czuba, 1999) defined power as, "the capacity to implement," allowing the concept to mean domination, authority, influence and shared power or "power with." Page and Czuba (1999) claimed that it is this definition of power, a process and occurring in relationship to others, that makes empowerment possible. This led them to define empowerment as "a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives, a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important."

The process and multi-dimension aspects of empowerment were captured by Kabeer's (2001 cited in Malhotra and Schuler, 2005) view which was "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Kabeer's (2001) definition also tracks the changes in a person's situation, from a powerless situation where one's abilities are constrained to an empowered situation where one's abilities are utilized to improve one's well-being.

The same aspects of empowerment were also emphasised by Narayan (2005) in her more specific definition of empowerment which was "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives." This definition monitors the changes in: (1) the unequal relationships within households and between poor people and the state, markets, or civil society; and (2) gender

inequalities manifested by marginalization, subordination, multiple burden, stereotyping and violence against women. Narayan (2005) also identified key factors that facilitate or constrain poor people's efforts to improve their own well-being and thus affect development outcomes. These factors were the institutional, social and political context of formal and informal rules and norms within which actors pursue their interests, and individual and collective assets and capabilities. Assets refer to the material assets which can be physical and financial while capabilities pertain to the ability of the person to use their assets to increase their well-being. These capabilities could be human (good health, education, and other life-enhancing skills), social (social belonging, leadership, identity, capacity to organize) and political (capacity to represent oneself and others, access information, form associations, and participate in the political life of the society).

Women's empowerment, on the other hand, encompasses two important features: a process of change which is towards greater equality or freedom of choice and action, and agency where women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). This definition viewed women not only as beneficiaries of change but as agents of change as well. The active involvement of women as agents of change in the development process was earlier stressed by Kabeer (1994) when she said that those whose voices have been suppressed for a long time must be the main actors in various areas of development. Thus, women must be given the necessary space, time and resources to allow them to articulate their own interests.

The village and women of Ban Thung Maha

Ban Thung Maha, a Thai-Buddhist community, is one of the seven villages comprising Tambol Pakklong, Pathew District, Chumphon Province, east coast of Southern Thailand. Thung Maha is noted for its fisheries and agricultural resources. Anchovy, squid, crabs, shrimps and other types of aquatic resources are caught with traditional fishing gears such as squid cast nets, anchovy purse seine and fish, shrimp and crab gill nets, and crab traps. Cultured fish like sea bass, grouper and green mussel are also grown in the area (Nasuchon, 2007). Large areas of land are allocated to rubber and palm oil production, and small areas to the cultivation of coconuts and vegetables.

In 2002, Thung Maha had 196 households engaged in both fishing and farming. While the majority of people were employed in fishing, a number were involved in farming and provided labour, mostly to rubber and palm plantations, especially during the off-season for fishing. Seasonally, some farmers also engaged in processing squid and anchovy products. A few were engaged in small businesses such as small scale grocery stores, vegetable shops, seafood processing and eateries.

The village lacks access to sanitary toilets, safe drinking water, health services, good access to roads and public transportation. Lack of transport constrained mobility. Mobile phones, television and radio were available for communication but the village had no internet access.

We assessed the women's positions in the village, relative to those of the men, with emphasis on their access to and control over the use of fisheries resources, access to political and administrative decision-making, and their activities.

Access to and control over fisheries resources. While access to the fisheries resources is open, their use and control are traditionally assumed by the men, especially in case of mobile species in coastal and off-shore areas where fishing activity is considered to be physically strenuous and risky. For sedentary species and/or less mobile fish species such as cultured seabass and shellfish, women have direct access and control. Such differential access to and control over the use of fishery resources also results in differential economic benefits. The preferential treatment of men is also shown in the fishers' official registration records, where all recorded fishers were male, and in membership in fishers' groups, which is largely dominated by men.

Access to political and administrative decision making. In Thung Maha, access to political and administrative decision-making is mostly given to men. The village head position, elected by the community, is expected to be a man. Except for public health, the same pattern is reflected in the 15 member committee tasked to assist the village headman by handling various community concerns, e.g., public relations, sports, culture, development, protection/surveillance, public health and the Tambol Administrative Organization. The under-representation of women in these leadership and/or administrative positions affirms the general perception in Thai society that public representation is a masculine domain. Women's positions in public health are just extensions of women's reproductive roles. This implies that politics remain a protected sphere of the men.

Women's activities. Women's activities were divided into household, economic and community. The household activities (cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing, rearing children and taking care of husbands) remained solely women's responsibilities.

In economic activities, women were involved in capture fishing, fish culture, shrimp farming, fishing port operations, fish processing, farming (rubber, palm and coconut) and retail trading. In capture fishing, women engaged in post-harvest activities such as sorting, weighing, selling a small portion of the fish catch to the community, and record keeping. In fish culture and shrimp farming, women shared in feed preparation, feeding, hauling of catch and selling of catch to the fish traders. Men's jobs revolved mainly around land preparation and cleaning and watching/guarding the ponds/cages. Fish processing was mostly woman's work, from sorting, cleaning, slicing, drying and packing, to selling to fish traders. While the law is silent about women's rights in fishing, cultural norms dictate that fishing is not a female domain, being strenuous, and dangerous.

In farming, women were found marketing coconut products, and tapping rubber trees, collecting latex, milling, transporting and marketing rubber products. In business, while women mostly managed small grocery stores and eateries, men shared in the task of watching the store and loading the goods into vehicles.

Women's involvement in community activities included the celebration of the Songkran (Water Festival) and Loi Krathong festivals where they took charge of cleaning their houses, temples, public places and official buildings, offering alms to the monks, listening to sermons, and watching the bathing rite for Buddha images and the monks. A similar pattern of activities is observed during traditional competitive boat racing which is celebrated in the month of October. Women also participated in mangrove planting, and the release of juvenile sea bass, shrimps and gravid crabs at the shore during the birthday celebrations of His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen.

Case stories: women in the productive and reproductive spheres

To better understand the situation of women and explore issues confronting them, five Thung Maha women (Darina, Pin, Nin, Puk, Nit) who were engaged in different undertakings, productive and reproductive, were selected to illustrate their regular daily activities, time allocations and marital relationships. A 24-hour clock was used to record times. The women's views on their work and their aspirations in life were also obtained for a clearer understanding of why their activities were undertaken. Fictitious names are used for all cases.

DARINA. A hardworking woman trader, Darina, 37, is married to a 42 years old trader named Dato. They have two children, both in primary school. From an early age, Darina used to be a fisher, setting out to sea with her father and then, after marrying, with her husband. But the unstable income and the risks involved in fishing forced them to engage in less hazardous undertakings, namely selling banana and yam fritters and other local sweets.

Like most of the hardworking women in Thung Maha, Darina starts her day at 03:00, doing household chores – cleaning the house, cooking breakfast – and making local sweets, while her husband prepares fish-balls and fries bananas and yam for sale in their shop. At 06:00, Darina rides her motorcycle and sets off to the rubber plantation to sell her homemade local sweets to the workers while Dato stays home, watches their shop and takes care of his mother and children. Darina comes home at 13:00 for lunch.

Darina's afternoon break is spent watching their shop while Dato goes to the market to buy yams, bananas and other ingredients for the local sweets. Darina prepares dinner while Dato washes the dishes – an arrangement well accepted by both parties. After dinner, both watch TV. Bedtime is usually at 21:00.

Darina likes her work because it allows her to drive around the village, see her friends and be updated on the latest news in the village. Darina dreams to own a rubber plantation someday for she believes that there is much money in rubber plantations.

PIN. A woman of influence, Pin, 62 years old, is married to a fish trader and occupies a position in a women's group. She has two sons, both already working and helping in the fish port.

Pin benefited a lot from training and an educational tour facilitated by the DOF. After assuming a leadership position in a women's group, Pin formed her own women's group primarily to help those who needed additional income. Using all her knowledge gained from the training given by the DOF, she ventured into buying and processing fish into fish crackers. She hired some members of her group and paid them 100 Baht for half a day's work. In addition to fish processing, Pin also engages in rubber cultivation.

Typically, Pin gets up at 03:00 to wait for the fishers to land their catch, buys fish and brings it to the factory for processing. During the lunch break, Pin usually makes a short visit to her rubber plantation and then goes back to the factory again.

Pin has stopped doing household chores which are now taken up by her daughter-in-law who is living in the same house. Pin used to keep the proceeds from fish crackers and the rubber plantation to herself. But, due to the declining income of her husband, she has to put out some of her earnings towards household expenses.

Pin believes that a wife should not be confined to the house. Women should find work outside to augment the family's income. Life would be easier if women had their own money. Pin related how the proceeds from her rubber plantation enabled her to travel and buy tracts of land in the North without the knowledge of her husband and thus, increased her sense of security. She also believes that as a member of the community, one must be involved in community work to change one's perspective in life and increase self-confidence. Pin claims that her training in Thailand and abroad allowed her to see the world outside, enhanced her understanding and appreciation of people and of women, provided her some business ideas and strategies which she applied to the group's livelihood activities, stimulated her entrepreneurial spirit and increased her passion to contribute to the development of the community.

Pin confessed that it was not easy for her at the start because of her husband's opposition to her new activities and the stereotyped role of women in the family. She recounted the many times that she had to argue with her husband who was against her long absences, especially when attending training courses and field exposure. Pin contended that women's standing in the community was much better now than before. She cited the fact that many women have multiple jobs outside the house and some travel by car.

NIN. Nin, 41, also holds a position in a women's group. A quiet yet strong woman, Nin is married to Bon, 57, and they have two grown children.

Nin and Bon are hardworking aquaculturists, raising sea bass in 32 cages with a total area of 60 m². Bon is almost always out of the house, spending 2-3 days at a time attending to the cages for 8 consecutive months of the year. Nin used to help Bon raise sea bass. After assuming a position in the women's group, however, Nin had to divide her time among household chores, aquaculture activities and management and operation of the seafood processing activity of the women's group. The last one she took on in her personal capacity.

Nin starts her day at 06:00 doing household chores – preparing breakfast, lunch, washing clothes and cleaning the house - before working at the factory. She works full-time at the factory, overseeing the processing, weighing, packing and marketing of the processed fish. She takes care of employing members of the group and pays them 200 Baht a day. Nin stays at the factory until 18:00, then goes home and prepares dinner for her family. Bedtime for Nin is usually 21:00.

Nin said she has no dreams for herself.

PUK. A food shop owner, Puk, 37, is a single parent. She was separated from her 35 year old husband five years ago, on the grounds of repeated infidelity. Tired of being lied to, Puk decided to end the relationship, with the understanding that her husband, Nyi, would provide some financial assistance for their child, but this has not materialized.

Puk finished high school and had a job in a computer company before she married Nyi. When Nyi moved to Songkla Province, Puk decided to transfer to Pathum Thani to be closer to Nyi. Puk's mother asked her to co-own her eatery so Puk would have additional income.

As a co-owner of the eatery, Puk works from 06:00 to 18:00, leaving her child under the care of her mother-in-law. Assisted by a female helper, Puk works in the eatery, including going to the market to buy vegetables and meat to washing the dishes. She usually drops by her friend's place for a chat before going home to rest. Puk believes that she is fortunate to have her own business for it provides her some money to finance her basic needs. When asked of her dreams, she said she had none for herself.

NIT. Nit, 52 years old, is a committed community leader. She is married to Ben, a fishermen. They have 3 grown up children. When she was little, Nit used to go out fishing with her father. When she married and had children, she stopped going to sea and engaged herself in drying squid for additional income. Often, she starts her day at 05:00, preparing food and doing some household chores while waiting for Ben's return from fishing. If Ben's catch of squid is not enough, Nit buys some more squid from other fishermen.

Nit spends at least 4 hours a day slicing the squid, laying them out on a flat sheet for drying while Ben takes his rest. Nit takes a short break during lunch and helps Ben prepare his fishing paraphernalia. After sending Ben off to sea, Nit resumes her work, packing some dried squid and selling them at the nearby market. Often, Nit goes home at 17:00, cleans the house and prepares dinner. Usually, she retires to bed at 20:00.

Nit is happy being able to work outside the house and has been delegated the community work of taking care of the community's guests. She is also grateful that her work as a squid drier and trader allows her to move around and socialize with people. Like Puk, Nit does not have a dream for herself.

Conclusions

The above analysis and stories show that women make significant contributions to sustaining the fishing village by engaging in multiple activities in the households, fishing, farming, business, resource conservation and socio-cultural activities, complementing the work of the men. The engagement of the five women (Darina, Pin, Nin, Puk and Nit) in reproductive and various productive activities confirms this. Their stories also tell how they provided income for their families. While the women have moved from home to the productive sphere, however, men have made very limited comparable movements into doing domestic work to ease the overall work of the women.

Women's access to low valued sedentary and/or less mobile species such as sea bass and shellfish, men's access to higher value species, male fishers' names being listed as registered fishers in the fisher's official registration record, and the male-dominated fishers' group show the traditional stereotyping and the unbalanced power relation between men and women which is highly skewed in favour of men. This gender imbalance is also reflected in the under-representation of women in political and administrative decision-making positions that deprives the community a large portion of an available pool of expertise to tap for its development efforts. Both Puk and Nin exemplify those women in the village with leadership potential and who could lead others to a development path. The experiences of Puk as she resisted the control of her husband and of Pin's separation from her unfaithful husband are evidence that gender subordination occurs. In particular, the infidelity and economic abuse by Pin's husband is a strong manifestation of gender bias. Their stories imply the need to consider these various forms of gender bias when addressing the concerns of women in a fishing village. Puk and Pin are just two of the village women undergoing similar experiences but who are powerless to resist.

Darina, Pin, Nin, Puk and Nit are cases, however, of women who have gained and exerted some degree of power and control over their relationships with the opposite sex and have attained some economic independence. The stories of Pin and Nin reveal how membership in women's group and capability trainings provided by the DOF have empowered them by enhancing their self-

confidence and skills in product development and marketing and provided them the courage to determine their life's direction and lead others. This shows that intervention efforts through women's organizations and the provision of skills and livelihood training, although extending women's domestic work, are effective. Such efforts provided good opportunities, especially leadership opportunities, for the women to realize their development potentials. Gender equality in the village could further be promoted through the provision of gender sensitivity training and education campaign on women's rights. It is also important that training provided to women should also encourage them to dream about their own futures.

References

- Kabeer, N. 1994. *Reversed realities: Gender hierarchies in development thought*. Verso, United Kingdom. 345 pp.
- Kabeer, N. 2003. *Gender mainstreaming in poverty eradication and the Millennium Development Goals: a handbook for policy-makers and other stakeholders*. Accessed at: <http://www.idrc.ca/openebooks/067-5/>, on 5 March 2010.
- Kittitornkool, J. 1996a. Part I country presentations: Thailand. In: *Proceedings of the globalization, gender and the fisheries: report of the Senegal workshop on gender perspectives in fisheries*. International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, Women in Fisheries Series 4:14-15.
- Kittitornkool, J. 1996b. *Women in southern Thailand small-scale fishing villages: amidst surging waves*. Workshop on gender relations in fisheries. Senegal, June 10 -18, 1996. International Collective in Support of Fishworkers and The Asia Foundation. 23 pp.
- Kreisberg, S. 1992. *Transforming power: domination, empowerment, and education*. State University of New York Press, Albany, New York. 264 pp.
- Malhotra, A. and S.R. Schuler. 2005. Women's empowerment as a variable in international development. In: *Measuring Empowerment: cross-discipline perspectives*. (ed. D. Narayan), pp. 71-88. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Narayan, D. 2005. Conceptual framework and methodological challenges. In: *Measuring empowerment: cross-discipline perspectives*. (ed. D. Narayan), pp. 3-38. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Nasuchon, N. 2007. *Aquaculture experiment*. In: *Proceedings of the regional seminar on integrated coastal resources management in Southeast Asia*. TD/RP/108 LBCFM-PD No. pp. 163-167. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center and the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, Bangkok.
- Page, N. and C. Czuba. 1999. *Empowerment: what it is?* Accessed at: <http://www.joe.org./joe/1999october/comm1.php>, on 20 November 2011.
- Quist, C. and L. Polotan-De la Cruz. 2008. *Integrating gender perspective in community-based coastal resources management approaches: a review of experiences and best practices of Oxfam Novib partners in Southeast Asia and other efforts from world-wide*. Final Report. International Collective in Support of Fishworkers. 142 pp.
- Siason, I., E. Tech, K.I. Matics, P.S. Choo, M. Shariff, E.S. Heruwati, T. Susilowati, N. Miki, A.B. Shelly, K.G. Rajabharshi, R. Ranjit, P.P. G.N. Siriwardena, M.C. Nandeesha and M. Sunderarajan. 2004. *Women in fisheries in Asia*. *Proceedings of the Global Symposium on Women in Fisheries: Sixth Asian Fisheries Forum*, 29 Nov. 2001, Kaoshiung, Taiwan, pp. 21-48. WorldFish Center and Asian Fisheries Society.
- The Technical Advisory Body for Fisheries Management. 2006. *Gender and fisheries in the Lower Mekong River Basin*. Mekong Fisheries Management Recommendation 4: 1-7.