

*Research Paper*

# **Women Fish Border Traders in Cambodia: What Shapes Women's Business Trajectories?**

**KYOKO KUSAKABE<sup>1\*</sup> and PRAK SEREYVATH<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Gender and Development Studies, School of Environment, Resources and Development Asian Institute of Technology, KlongLuang, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>Cambodian Institute for Research and Rural Development, Street 410, Sangkat Boeung Trabek, Khan Chamkar Mon, Phnom-Penh, Cambodia

## **Abstract**

This paper revisits the study of fish border traders at the Thai-Cambodian border in 2006. The political and economic development at the border influenced Cambodian women fish traders' business trajectories in different ways. The diversity of business development of the traders shows that women's businesses do not necessarily suffer from the same challenges but are influenced by various factors at micro/meso/macro level environment and relations. The paper classified traders' business trajectories into four, and showed that their relation with their husbands related to their business is not only of control over the business but also of a more subtle negotiation in their level of involvement. The particularity of fish as a commodity of trade also shapes how the trade is imagined as women's business that can keep the business under women's control. The analysis indicates the importance of context-informed analysis and a nuanced understanding of their business and life trajectories in order to understand the challenges and opportunities that women traders face in this market.

## **Introduction**

Women play an important role in fisheries. Contrary to the image that fisheries is a male dominated occupation, around 60% of fishers and fish workers are women. If we take only Cambodia, around 57% of workers are women (de Pryck 2013). Women are especially concentrated in trade and processing activities. Kusakabe et al. (2008)'s study on fish traders at the border of Cambodia and Thailand showed how women small-scale traders were getting further marginalised following the official opening of the border. The open border signified a closure of opportunity for women small-scale traders. By officially opening the border, larger traders were able to enjoy better opportunities while smaller traders were pushed out by larger traders. Since this study was conducted in 2006, fish availability in Tonle Sap has changed and border-crossing administration has become more organised.

---

\*Corresponding author. Email address: kyokok@ait.asia

We have found that business options expanded for some of the fish cross-border traders, while for others, it diminished. Contrary to our expectations, women traders do not necessarily share the same disadvantages and challenges often described in literature on women's small and micro scale enterprises (Dignard and Havet 1995; Liedholm and Mead 1999; Seligmann 2001). Therefore we start our paper by problematising the general assumptions of women's disadvantage and question why different women traders experienced fish trade differently and how this has happened by focusing on the macro economic and environmental changes, government policy changes as well as the particular nature in which the fish trade is operating. Women's small-scale fish trade is often considered as a survivalist business where women earn their secondary income to support their household. This paper challenges this notion and argues that different factors develop and define women's fish trade in different ways. The factors that influence the business is gendered, but these do not necessarily keep the business small. We will begin with a short review of women in micro and small-scale businesses. After describing the historical changes in the study area and our methodology for the study, we introduce four types of traders according to their business trajectory and analyse the factors that might have led to these changes especially taking into consideration the particular nature of fish as the commodity of trade.

### ***Women in micro and small-scale business***

There has been much focus on micro and small-scale enterprise development for poverty alleviation. However, researchers point out that studies from gender perspectives have been relatively few (Dignard and Havet 1995; Seligmann 2001; Della-Giusta and Phillips 2006; Strier 2010; Rijkers and Costa 2012) although significant research has been done in women's work in the informal economy (Chen et al. 2004; Floro and Swain 2013; Kabeer 2012). Women's small enterprises are said to demonstrate certain characteristics. Liedholm and Mead (1999) show that women-owned enterprises tend to be smaller and have lower annual growth than men-owned enterprises, women are more risk averse, and they tend to diversify into other areas rather than expand their existing business. Della-Giusta and Phillips (2006) identify three areas where common characteristics are found among women's enterprises: (1) lack of access to physical/human/ social capital as well as technical know-how and lack of time and mobility; (2) domestic work responsibility and relatively negative image on making money; (3) gender segregation in type of business. Others have identified how women entrepreneurs give priority to family well-being (Babbs 1989) as well as how, when their businesses become successful, men can take over (Overå 2003; Strier 2010). Value chain analyses show how women's small businesses are often cornered into lower value markets and have weaker negotiation power than men's businesses (Barrientos 2001; Williams 2012). However, there is still no agreement on the importance and relevance of each of these particular gender differences and disadvantages. For example, Foss (2010) argues through her review of empirical research articles from 1980 to 2008, that there is no difference in the extent of connections that women and men entrepreneurs have.

Despite that, there is a general agreement that there are gender differences in the condition around women and men-owned businesses. Brush et al. (2009), in order to capture women's specific disadvantage, advocate for an analytical framework for women's business by adding to

the 3Ms of business (money, market, management), the 2Ms (motherhood, meso/macro environment).

On the other hand, studies showed that how women's small businesses develop as well as how they influence intra-household relations is context specific, and not all women's enterprises face the same problems as listed above, or develop in a certain way. Mutopo (2010)'s study of border traders at the Zimbabwe-South Africa border shows a specific situation of these border traders and how they overcame gender stereotypes in their effort to ensure household survival. Strier (2010) also notes how the linkage between women's business ownership, poverty reduction and gender empowerment depends on the social context. The differences may be caused not only by the societal context but also by the women's individual lives and the micro contexts that they are in. Hapke and Ayyankaril (2004), in their analysis of fish trade, maintain that women's business trajectories are determined by their personal life history including the particular economic necessity of the household, their age, and number of children. Overå (2003) in her analysis of fish trade in Ghana, flags the concept of maneuvering space of women - a space where kinship, as an ideology, defines women's and men's affairs. She argues that in matrilineal communities, women were able to invest in fishing equipment and become owners and managers, while in patrilineal communities, women are confined to mobilising only other women for their business.

Not only are the macro and micro contexts important, but also the nature of the commodity itself is important in defining women's business. Floro and Swain (2013) question why it is that women are dominating small food trade and conclude that it is because food trade contributes to household food security more than other goods, by being able to convert their wares to household consumption. Overå (2003)'s study in Ghana notes that women's business activities depend on how men see women's business. When men feel threatened, they will try to confine women's business, while when men feel that they are supported by women's business, women can expand their business even to men's realm. This is because particular types of fish trade carry certain status and an image of masculinity and femininity.

Based on these discussions, in analysing fish border trade between Thailand and Cambodia, we will take a contextual approach to analyse how the changes of women traders' businesses are influenced by the macro and micro environment as well as the particular nature of fish as a commodity of trade. We will follow Brush et al. (2009) in putting importance on motherhood (concretely speaking, women's reproductive and caring roles) and the meso and macro environment (specifically the fish market of Tonle Sap and traders' relations with fishers, officers and with their fellow traders) when analysing the women's business development. Although social norms in Cambodia generally approve of women doing independent businesses, as Walby (2009) maintains, women are not a monolith, and it is not only gender differences that influence women's lives but other factors such as age, religion, education level, class, location, etc. We need a nuanced and subtle analysis of women's business. Changes and development of women's business is not the same, and different women face different challenges in their lives and in their businesses. A woman can be influenced by her personal life events as well as by a wider socio-economic and political situation at that particular moment. This paper reviews and compares different women traders' lives and businesses. Some traders face typical problems that are depicted in women in

small-scale enterprise literature mentioned above, while some seem to have overcome these challenges and have developed their own niche. The analysis will situate women's lives in the light of fisheries policies and border trade policies and analyse how these macro-environments affected and shaped women's businesses. Below, we will first describe the methodology of this study, then, go through the historical changes of fish trade in Cambodia. We have identified four different types of business changes among women fish traders. We will introduce them and discuss three aspects that we find are of particular importance in defining business development of border fish traders at the Cambodia-Thai border.

## **Methodology**

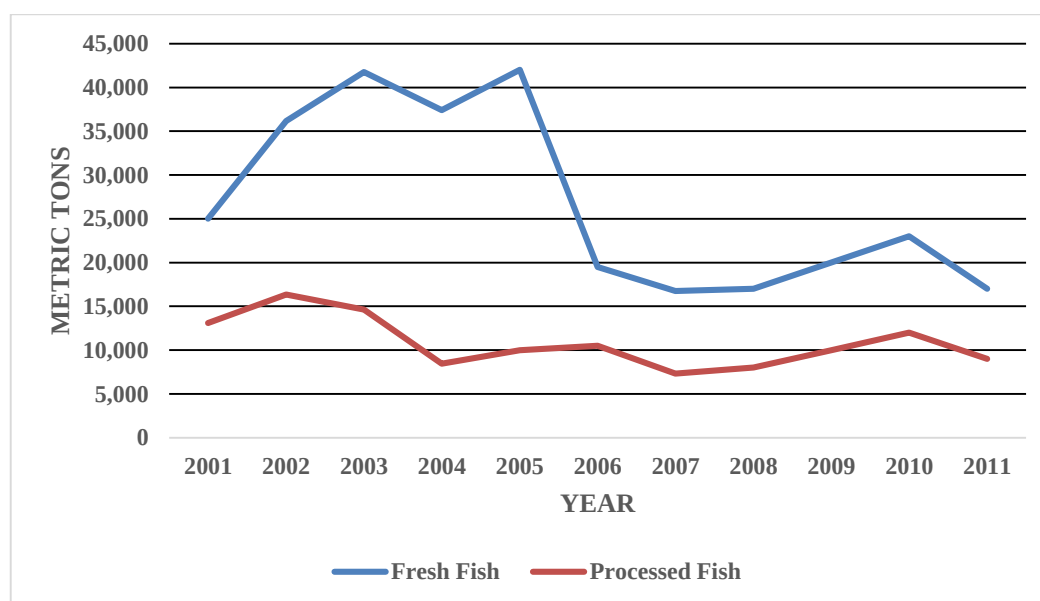
This study is based on 46 in-depth interviews with women and men border fish traders (32 women, 10 men, 4 couples). We have interviewed traders at Poipet (border town in Cambodia adjacent to Thailand), Rong Kluer Market (border market at the Thai side of the border with Cambodia), Banteay Meanchey Province, Battambang province and Pursat Province. Most of the respondents are from Poipet. The data collection was carried out from June 2012 to May 2013. Since fish trade is seasonal, and traders scattered, we started by interviewing some traders at Poipet market, and then conducted snowball sampling by asking traders to recommend us to other traders. We attempted to maintain some balance in the number of large, medium and small traders, as well as by gender. Although around half of large traders are men, small traders are almost all women. The study emphasised women's experience, so we have interviewed more women than men. We tried to interview traders who have quit the trade, but we could find only a few, since it was not known where they had moved to. All the names of respondents are pseudonyms.

### ***Historical change of fisheries and fish trade in Tonle Sap***

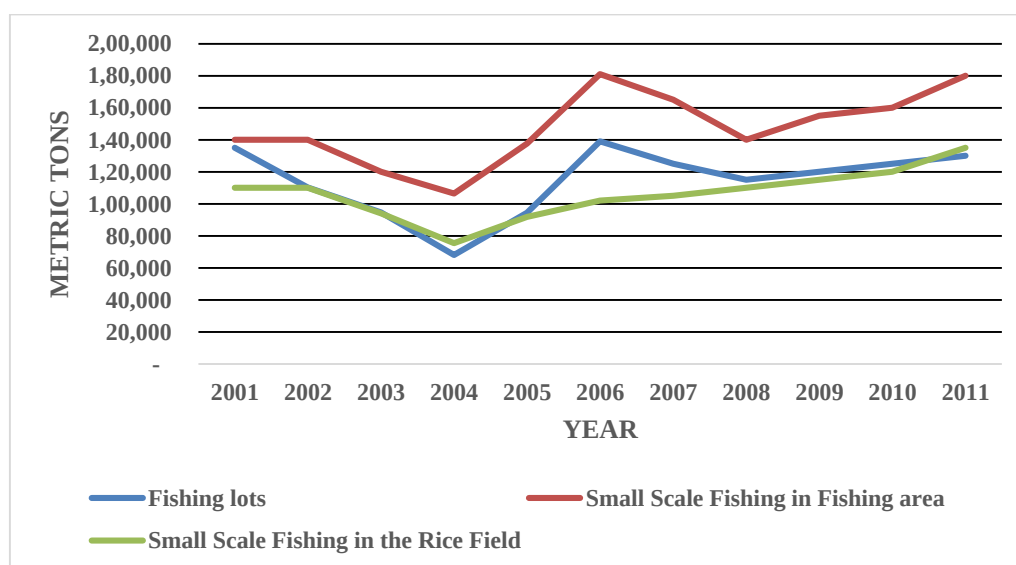
Until the late 1990s, the border between Thailand and Cambodia was still a war zone. At that time, women had an edge over men in cross-border fish trade, since they were not seen as combatants and thus it was easy for women to move around the area. During this time, fish was abundant and the price was good, so traders at that time were able to accumulate much wealth. However, in the late 1990s, when the civil war subsided, government agencies and police/soldiers started controlling the trade. A branch of a state export company was established in Poipet, and started collecting fees from exporting traders (Kusakabe et al. 2008). Chea and McKenney (2003) reported that along the street from Tonle Sap to the border, there were 27 checkpoints that collected money from traders. Cars were not allowed to cross the border, so all traders needed to reload their fish to push carts, where they needed to pay transporters to move the fish across the border.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, although there were many people who were collecting fees, there was still much fish available for small fishers to sell. Women traders had an edge over men traders since they were able to negotiate with officers better than men traders (Kusakabe et al. 2008). However, since around 2006, the amount of fish available for export has decreased (Fig. 1 for fish export figures, although Rab et al. (2006) noted that this is gravely under reported), although the fish catch in Tonle Sap has not decreased (Fig. 2). The decrease in available fish for trade has forced many downstream traders in the commodity chain to contact fishers and collectors

directly to ensure fish supply. The decrease in the amount of fish available for export has led to a shorter commodity chain. In Cambodia, no incidences have been reported of sex for fish, like in Africa (de Pryck 2013), but those who were not able to establish links with fishers had more difficulty in securing fish.



**Fig. 1.** Inland fish export in metric tons.



**Fig. 2:** Fish production in Tonle Sap.

Source: Fig.1 and Fig.2

1. The Five Year Achievement Report of the Department of Fisheries (2001-2005) including the action plan for 2006
2. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2006 and the Action Plan for 2007
3. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2007 and the Action Plan for 2008
4. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2008 and the Action Plan for 2009
5. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2009 and the Action Plan for 2010
6. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2010 and the Action Plan for 2011
7. The Annual Achievement of the Department of Fisheries in 2011 and the Action Plan for 2012

At the same time, since the 2000s, increasingly more Cambodian people living in the Thai-Cambodian border started going to Thailand as migrant laborers. Traders complained that there are fewer fishers in Tonle Sap, since they find it more lucrative to work in Thailand. This might also have contributed to the decrease in fish availability. Added to this, in the 2000s, there have been several instances of border closures with Thailand, because of the Thai-Cambodian bilateral conflict. When the border is closed, traders have to bear the cost of not being able to sell the fish.

In 2010, the Cambodian Prime Minister declared that there would be no fee collections for fish transported across provinces, and private fishing lots were to be abolished allowing small fishers access to all areas of the Lake. Large traders were affected by the abolishment of fishing lots, since it has now become difficult for them to source fish in bulk. Whether such measures have improved fish production is still not clear, although the Fisheries Administration stated that the fish availability for the domestic market increased while export has suffered due to the closure of private fishing lots.

### ***Women fish traders***

We have identified four types of fish traders at the border of Thailand and Cambodia. The first are large traders who started small, but at the highest fish production period, were able to trade more than 5 tonnes per transaction. They normally have their own vehicles/trucks. They have been trading for a long time, usually since the 1990s. The second type is former large traders who have quit the fish business.

These people also started small, and could expand their business, but in the last few years, because of lack of fish supply, they did not find the business attractive and quit fish exports. The third group is mid-sized traders. They have also started small, and expanded, but only to a few tons per transaction at the highest fish production period. The fourth group is the small fish traders, who trade a few hundred kilograms per transaction. The number of respondents under each category by the business owner/operator is summarised in Table 1. The number of respondents in each group does not reflect the proportion of each in the total population of traders in each group. We have covered more than half of the large traders that operate in the area, while the proportion of small traders that we covered is low, since there are many small traders in the study area. So, we do not claim that our sample is a representation of fish traders in the study area. However, as far as the size of the trader goes, we have been able to cover almost all types. We used mainly qualitative information since our focus is to clarify the interconnectedness of various factors that shape the development of women's fish businesses. Below, we will describe the characteristics of these groups of traders.

### ***Large traders***

All women large traders started their fish business in the early 1990s, and either they themselves or their parents were doing business before the early 1990s. Trading fish during that time gave them an edge over latecomers, since the trade was lucrative at that time, and it was easy to accumulate capital.

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents.

| Size/ Type                                                                                                                                           | Operators of respondent's businesses |          |           |           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
|                                                                                                                                                      | Women                                | Men      | Couple    | Total     |
| Large traders (Those who, at highest fish production period, could trade up to more than 4.5 tonnes.transaction <sup>-1</sup> .time <sup>-1</sup> )* | 6                                    | 2        | 9         | 17        |
| Large traders who quit                                                                                                                               | 2                                    | 0        | 1         | 3         |
| Mid-sized traders (trade around few tonnes.transaction <sup>-1</sup> .time <sup>-1</sup> )                                                           | 3                                    | 5        | 4         | 12        |
| Small traders (trade few hundred kg.transaction <sup>-1</sup> .time <sup>-1</sup> )                                                                  | 8                                    | 0        | 6         | 14        |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                                                                                         | <b>19</b>                            | <b>7</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>46</b> |

\* This includes four fish processors.

Source: In-depth interviews.

On the other hand, men traders interviewed started their trade late, but they had certain connections or exposure before starting trade: one used to work with the Department of Fisheries before starting the business, one used to be in the refugee camp, and one had a relative already in the trade. Men started to join when border trade was officially opened and when it was possible to do large trade. Women large traders normally started small, which is not attractive or socially considered appropriate for men. Women large traders have never stopped their businesses since they started. Even during pregnancies and lactating periods, after resting for two weeks to two months, they were back in business. One trader said that she tried to schedule the birth so that she could deliver her child during the low season of fish. By having a growing business, they were able to mobilise their relatives or hire other people to help look after their children. Many also operate as couples, so they can cover for each other. In some cases, the husband delivers the fish to the market, while the wife negotiates with the buyers by phone from home, so that she does not have to go to the market. There was one exception to this pattern. One woman trader started the trade in the early 1990s and expanded her business very rapidly, but then, her husband contracted HIV/AIDS and she spent all her money for treatment. However, because of her network of buyers and sellers and her reputation in the market, she was able to come back quickly to the trade, and later became a shareholder of an export company.

Unlike other studies (see Overå 2003), we found that all the women large traders we met were able to keep control over their business fully, and their businesses were not taken over by husbands when they grew large. On the contrary, as their businesses grew, the women tried to keep their husbands out of the business. Some feel that their husbands are an obstacle for business and try to keep them at bay. Sophany (woman large processor) said:

*“When I married him, I thought I married a man with a stable job [and I could depend on his income]. After he lost his job, he became alcoholic and he does not seem to be interested in getting a job. He has once helped bring fish to Poipet, but he drank there [and could not do anything]. When he gets out of hand, I pay the police 50-100 dollars to put him in a drug rehabilitation center. I put him there for 3 months or until he shows remorse. He has been there three times already. He gets an injection once a month to keep him sober, but once he drinks he is out of control..... I told him that I will give him 5,000 dollars so that he can look for a new woman. But he said no – 5,000 dollars will be used up in no time. It is difficult to be a woman”.*

Theary (woman large trader) said that she does not let her husband come to the market since she does not want her husband, who is an officer at the government radio station, to see her and her fellow traders speak rough words in the market.

*“I do not discuss my business with my husband. When I make a loss, I do not tell him. I do not want him to be involved in the business. He is not used to hearing harsh words (because he is a news reporter in a radio station so he is used to sweet sounds and voice) that market vendors use. He would be disappointed to hear his wife use such harsh words in the market, so I do not want to have him around”.*

They are able to manage both their businesses and their husbands and define how the business should run. This group of people was affected by the closure of fishing lots, since they have been buying fish in bulk from lot owners. Now they have to gather fish from scattered markets, and that is making it more difficult for them. However, they still have quite a large network to buy fish, so they are still in a good position to continue their trade.

### ***Former large traders who have quit business***

It was difficult to find those who quit business, since if they are in another business, existing fish traders do not know where they are, so it was difficult to contact them. Daline, who was a large woman fish trader, started running a resort and guest house, saying that the income from fish trade is now too small, and those people who know the good days feel lazy to continue with the trade when it gives so little returns. Sopheap and her husband used to be well-known exporters. However, she got drugs planted in her wares, and was arrested by Thai police for drug trafficking. She suspected that it was done by other traders who were jealous of her success. Her husband had to use up all the money that they saved to get her back home, and that was the end of their fish business.

Sopheap was an exceptional case, but other women large traders who have quit the trade all had other options. It should be noted that fish trade does not provide high social status. As Daline says, fish trade is very tiring because most of the work is done in the middle of the night, and it is smelly. So, those who have options will try to move out, and that is why men get involved only when the business is considered sufficiently large.

### ***Mid-sized trader***

This group of traders has a mixed profile. Some started late in the 2000s, but could expand to become middle-sized trader, and some started early in the 1990s, but could not grow to become large traders. Many of them are working as couples. One couple was trading independently before getting married. The other two started the trade together, one early in the 1990s and one in the 2000s. All women mid-size traders have parents who were into retail trade. Mid-sized men traders did not have the type of exposure and connections that the large men traders had, and many started off as hired workers in the fish market. Mid-sized traders are professional traders, but at the same time, they often have other income sources to supplement the volatile fish trade income. They are good at diversifying their income sources, so although they are affected by the lack of supply of



fish, and suffer from severe competition to procure fish, they are able to sustain themselves. Some traders import groceries from Thailand and sell these in Cambodia, some have rice fields, and some work as drivers and some also sell in domestic markets.

### **Small traders**

All but three respondents in this group started their business in the 2000s. They joined the trade after the most lucrative period ended, and it became increasingly difficult to secure fish to sell. Two of the respondents who started in the 1990s had no relatives in trade and were from farming household. This might have affected their orientation and exposure to business. Chanda, who started business in the 1990s, is a widow who lost her husband to HIV/AIDS. She used to be a domestic market seller in Cambodia, but she got into conflict with the market committee who wanted to evict her to give her selling place to another trader. She is also looking after her grandson, since her daughter went to Thailand to work as a migrant worker. So, even though she has started the trade early, she has had difficulty in concentrating on her business. There are also many respondents who are doing business as couples. However, in contrast with mid-sized traders, this group of respondents does not have other sources of income. Among those who are working as couples, only one of them has another source of income: the husband works as a construction worker aside from fish trade. There is no male small trader who is doing business alone. One of the couple respondents said that when the wife is pregnant and could not work on fish trade, he will work as a motorbike taxi driver rather than do fish trade alone. Small-scale fish trade is solely a women's occupation, and men are only engaged as an individual when the business size is not so small. For women small-scale traders, all of them have been introduced to fish border trade by others – aunts, cousins, neighbors, sisters – or have been working in Thailand as migrant workers and became familiar with Thailand, but they have not worked with those who introduced them after they started their own business. Not only are they disadvantaged since they started the trade late, but their trade was interrupted often because of child delivery and rearing. Nary started her fish border trade in 2000, following her husband's aunt, and was able to expand the business. However, in 2003, she got pregnant, and quit trade for two years. She resumed her trade in 2005, but her business remains small since she had to work from scratch again. Sophorn has had continuous difficulty in concentrating on her business because of her reproductive burden.

*“When my child was three months old, I had to go to buy fish together with the baby at 3 a.m. I had to tie the baby in the front. My mother-in-law was not living with us at that time, so there was no one who could look after the baby. Now, my mother-in-law is living with us, but she is sick and I have to look after her and the children. So, I cannot go far away from my house. My mother-in-law used to live with her own daughter and looked after her children. When she got old and sick, she wanted to come back to her own village, and that is how we ended up with her”.*

## **Discussion**

There has been a decline in fish resources from Cambodia available for export to Thailand and that has seriously affected the border traders. Border trade was lucrative in the 1990s, but competition became more and more severe with fewer fish available for export, and when

formal/informal payments for export did not reduce. The period in which the traders joined the fish trade is crucial in determining their present business performance. However, such a macro environment change cannot by itself explain the diversity in border trade business development. Our study shows that large women traders were able to manage their reproductive work as well as their relationships with their husbands better than women in other groups. Mid-size traders were able to balance the volatile fish market with other income sources. The most vulnerable were the small-size traders, who had intermittent business experience because of their difficulty in juggling their reproductive responsibilities with their business, and because they had few other income sources.

Based on our analysis, we identified three issues that are of particular interest to understand the development of women's fish border trade: (i) effect of reproductive responsibilities of women; (ii) organising women traders' trust and networks; and (iii) women traders' relations with their husbands.

### ***Reproductive responsibilities of women***

How women traders are able to manage or mobilise support for reproductive responsibilities is one of the main reasons why some women are able to make their business grow. Small traders not only started their businesses late, but they also were not able to get support for their care responsibilities, which forced them to discontinue their business from time to time. Such discontinuity makes it difficult for them to expand their businesses. For example, Chanda lost her husband to HIV/AIDS. Her daughter was deserted by her husband and left with a son. To support the son, the daughter decided to go to Thailand to work, leaving her small son with Chanda. She also has to take care of her ailing mother, and had no one else to support her with the care work.

*"Nowadays, difficulty in fish trade is that there is no one to help me take care of my mother and grandson. I have to bring my grandson to the market [since my mother is too sick to look after him]".*

Some decades earlier, Chanda had stopped her trade when she delivered her own baby, since her mother was not available to look after the baby at that time. Therefore, even though she has started her business in 1995, she remains a small trader.

Sophaphin (woman mid-size trader) said that after she had children, she could not go to market herself but had to sell to her mother-in-law, and hence could only indirectly be engaged in trade. Sophorn (woman small trader) said that since she has a baby, she could not go to places far from home. Larger traders were able to hire others or depend on other relatives to look after children. The smaller traders face more difficulties in juggling their caring responsibilities.

Socheat (large trader) decided to send her children to her relatives in Phnom Penh, since

*"I am too busy to care for my children. I will not be able to even check whether they have gone to school or not. My mother-in-law is also the same. She does not have time to take care of*

*grandchildren. If the children are here [in Poipet], they will not listen to elders. So, it is better if they are in Phnom Penh”.*

### ***Organising women traders’ trust and networks***

Overå (2003) said that trust and social networks are very important for fish traders, since this is the “only security” they have. Women entrepreneurs have difficulty in accessing resources, and organising is considered to be effective in allowing access. Although we also find that trust and networks are important for border traders in the Thai-Cambodian border, many of our respondents were not keen to operate joint businesses with other traders. Some said that cooperation between traders itself is problematic. The competition among traders on the Cambodian side of the market is very fierce. Hak (man large trader) said:

*“There is no fish traders’ association. It is difficult for traders to work together especially now that there is less fish. It is difficult to help each other”.*

Even among relatives, it is difficult to cooperate. Pisey (woman mid-size trader) said:

*“Relatives who do fish trade always get upset with each other because, to do fish trade, we need to have regular suppliers but they always fight over suppliers”.*

Here, when they refer to “company”, actually, it is more of a cooperative. The Department of Fisheries encouraged traders to come together to form a “company” so that they could have better negotiation power with Thai traders, and be able to manage fisheries resources better. Some of our large trader respondents were shareholders of such “companies”, but the general sentiment of middle and small traders were that they are not keen to do business with others, and they put more importance on their relationship with Thai customers than cooperating with fellow Cambodian traders.

Cambodian traders are not keen to work with their fellow Cambodian traders, but they are keen to strengthen their ties with Thai traders. As Sochivy (woman large processor) and Daline (former woman large trader) said, one of the main reasons why traders do not want to work in company is because they will have conflicts about which Thai customer the company will serve first. Sochivy said: *“It is easier to do business alone. The Thai customers become confused, since they cannot order directly to us personally like before. In theory, it is good to work as a company, but in reality, it does not work like that”.*

Daline said: *“The most important part about trade is regular customers. The whole trade solely depends on this... In order to keep the relationship with regular customers, sometimes, I will make a loss, but I can cover it up later... It is not possible to have a fresh fish company, since there will be conflicts about which customer’s demand we should fulfill first. Everyone wants to keep good relations with their own customers, and everyone wants priority for their own customers”.*

Cambodian traders face increased competition with other Cambodian traders to secure fish. In the volatile fish trade, Thai traders are the only stable element, since once they establish good

relation with Thai traders, they will buy all the fish Cambodian traders bring. So, they find it most important to keep good relations with Thai traders, and that is the only way that they are able to maintain their business through price swings and fluctuating fish availability. As seen from Figures 1 and 2, fish catch in Tonle Sap is not decreasing while fish available for export drastically decreased since around 2006. Therefore, traders need to fight over fish to secure themselves fish to sell, so they find it more important to secure their upstream and downstream linkages rather than be organised as traders horizontally. Therefore, traders find it important to keep the linkages not only with Thai traders but also with fishers. Sunnary (woman small trader) said:

*“Sometimes I have to buy knowing that I will incur a loss, because I have to keep the relationship with the suppliers. Now, since there are a lot of traders, people try to take away other traders’ suppliers”.*

However, maintaining relations with fishers is difficult because there are many fishers and fishers often do not show loyalty to traders even when traders extend credit to them. It is also noted that the relationship with Thai traders is not one of equals. Thai traders have an upper hand in the trade, since they have more direct access to market, and hence the Cambodian traders are unable to set prices but have to accept the price that Thai traders offer them. However, despite such relationships, Cambodian traders still prefer to strengthen their linkages with Thai traders rather than their linkages with Cambodian traders. At the same time, it is noted that women traders, especially small traders, depend on senior traders to be introduced to the trade. They also depend on support from relatives and neighbors to manage their childcare activities that will allow them to focus on trade. Therefore, while trust and networks are the only security that fish traders have (Overå 2003), many factors push Cambodian traders to depend fully on Thai customers, putting them into a one-way cycle of dependence.

These factors include the increasingly tight nature of the fish export market as well as women’s lack of time to go beyond the day-to-day operation of their business and household matters due to their heavy work burden in both their business and household, and lack of institutional support on any aspect of their operations.

### ***Relations with their husbands***

Fish trade, especially small fish trade, does not carry high social status, and few men are into the business when the business is small. At the same time, like in the matrilineal communities in Overå’s (2003) study, Cambodian women enjoy considerable freedom in business operation, and because fish business itself is not of high status, even when women’s fish trade becomes larger, women are often able to maintain their independence of their businesses. However, although most women traders seem to be operating quite independently from their husbands, it seems that their relationships with their husbands still influence their business operations in various ways. Some women traders are doing business with their husbands – some on equal footing, and some led by women. The wife will manage the sales and price, and husband will take care of the transportation of fish. Other women run businesses alone. We find all of these patterns of business operations in

all sizes of businesses, and whether a business is run only by a woman or by a couple does not seem to affect the business performance.

The difference between large women-run business and the small women-run business is that for the larger business, women are able to “manage” their husbands and gender relations in the household. For example, Sophany, who runs one of the largest fish processing businesses in Cambodia, was not happy to have her husband involved in the fish business, since he gets drunk while at work. So, whenever he gets out of hand, she will call the police to get her husband into the drug rehabilitation center. Nary (small trader) also did not want her husband to be involved, and she is happy that her husband is not interested in getting involved either. He will stay at home and look after the house and the children while she works in the market.

*“If I waited for my husband to find work and just stay at home for my husband to deliver money to me, I would not have enough money to support my family because his work is not regular. I think my husband can help me more by looking after the children and the household. If I did not have him, it would be more difficult for me to be involved in the fish trade. [Playing such a breadwinner role] has become a habit.”*

Some studies note that husbands’ support is important for women’s business, and when women’s businesses grow, then husbands will take over (Overå 2003). The study of fish border traders shows that the ways in which women’s relations with their husbands influence their businesses are more nuanced. In our study we have not seen any business that has been taken over by a husband. Like Daline said, running a business as a couple will make it easier especially when managing growth, since they can have certain divisions of labor between husband and wife. But some large exporters are able to manage single-handedly their household work and business by assigning reproductive work to other women and managing to keep their husbands out of their business. Small traders have more difficulty in doing this, because they have fewer resources with which to manage their workloads. A few traders, like Nary, were able to depend on their husbands to do the household chores. Others were not able to mobilise their husband’s help for either business or household work. All Cambodian women traders seem to be in charge of their business, but a close look at their intra-household division of labor and the reasons why such arrangements are being made gives us a better understanding of the burden that women are forced to carry.

## Conclusion

What the cases of women fish traders show us is that many fish traders do not fit the stereotypes of women entrepreneurs. Their business development is an outcome of a combination of external factors and personal family factors. As Brush et al. (2009) noted, motherhood and meso/micro environment factors play a large role in how women’s businesses perform. Although all women traders suffer from heavy reproductive responsibility (see also Hapke and Ayyankaril 2004), how such responsibility affects their trade depend on their resources that they can mobilise, both financial and human. The relationships with their husbands are more complicated than just checking on who has control over the business. Some want more support, while others want less interference from their husbands. Noting that fish trade is not of high social status, a takeover by

husbands does not seem to be an issue in this trade. Among small traders, no man would like to be involved in the first place. As such, the commodity that is traded has a great influence on how women perform in the business. The particularity of fish trade creates a certain condition under which traders are put into a certain position in the commodity chain. The harsh competition without any external support pushes traders not to cooperate with each other but to depend on the very exploitative relations with Thai traders and Cambodian officials, transporters and fishers, putting them into a more disadvantaged position in the commodity chain. The study emphasised the importance of context-informed analysis (Strier 2010) of fish traders as well as the work-life course analysis (Hapke and Ayyankaril 2004). Fish trade has a particular characteristic which differs from other trade and as such, there is a need to develop a separate analytical framework to capture the particularity of trade and its impact on the actors involved.

### Acknowledgement

This study was supported by the Research Council of Norway through the project 'Revisiting Gender in Development: Complex inequalities in a Changing Asia'.

### References

- Babb, F.E. 1989. Between field and cooking pot: The political economy of market women in Peru. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 263 pp.
- Barrientos, S. 2001. Gender, flexibility and global value chains. IDS bulletin 32 (3):83-93.
- Brush, C.G., A. de Bruin and F. Welter. 2009. A gender-aware framework for women's entrepreneurship. International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship 1 (1):8-24.
- Chea, Y. and B. McKenney. 2003. Fish exports from the Great Lake to Thailand. Working paper 27, Cambodia development resource institute, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 56 pp.
- Chen, M.A., J. Vanek and M. Carr. 2004. Mainstreaming informal employment and gender in poverty reduction: A handbook for policy-makers and other stakeholders. Commonwealth secretariat, London. 248 pp.
- de Pryck, J.D. 2013. Good practice policies to eliminate gender inequalities in fish value chains. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Rome. 106 pp.
- Della-Giusta, M. and C. Phillips. 2006. Women entrepreneurs in the Gambia: Challenges and opportunities. Journal of International Development 18:1051-1064.
- Dignard, L. and J. Havet (eds.). 1995. Women in micro- and small-scale enterprise development. Westview, San Francisco. 282 pp.
- Floro, M.S. and R. B. Swain. 2013. Food security, gender and occupational choice among urban low-income households. World Development 42: 89-99.
- Foss, L. 2010. Research on entrepreneur networks: The case for a constructionist feminist theory perspective. International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship 2 (1):83-102.
- Hapke, H. M. and D. Ayyankaril. 2004. Gender, the work-life course, and livelihood strategies in a South Indian fish market. Gender, place and culture 11 (2):229-256.
- Kabeer, N. 2012. Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: Labour markets and enterprise development, Discussion paper 29/12, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. 65 pp.

- Kusakabe, K., S. Prak, U. Suntornratana and N. Sriputinibondh. 2008. Gendering border spaces: Impact of open border policy between Cambodia-Thailand on small-scale women fish traders. *African and Asian Studies* 7 (1):1-17.
- Liedholm, C. and D. Mead. 1999. *Small enterprises and economic development: The dynamics of micro and small enterprises*. Routledge, London. 130 pp.
- Mutopo, P. 2010. Women trading in food across the Zimbabwe-South Africa border: Experiences and strategies. *Gender and Development* 18 (3):465-477.
- Overå, R. 2003. Gender ideology and maneuvering space for female fisheries entrepreneurs. *Research review NS* 19 (2):49-66.
- Rab, M.A., N. H. Navy, L. Seng, A. Mahfuzuddin and K. Viner. 2006. *Marketing infrastructure, distribution channels and trade pattern of inland fisheries resources Cambodia: An exploratory study*. WorldFish Center, Penang, Malaysia. 50 pp.
- Rijkers, B. and R. Costa. 2012. Gender and rural non-farm entrepreneurship. *World development* 40 (12):2411-2426.
- Seligmann, L. 2001. *Women traders in cross-cultural perspective: Mediating identities, marketing wares*. Stanford University press. 328 pp.
- Strier, R. 2010. Women, poverty and the microenterprise: Context and discourse. *Gender, work and organisation* 17 (2):195-218.
- Walby, S. 2009. *Globalisation and inequalities: Complexity and contested modernities*. Sage publication, Los Angeles. 508 pp.
- Williams, M. 2012. Summary: Overcoming gender inequalities in fish supply chains to inform policy and action. IIFET 2012 Tanzania Proceedings special session on markets and value chains for small aquaculture and fisheries enterprises with a focus on gender. 6pp.