

*Technical Paper*

# **A Gender Analysis of the Adopted Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication: Constraints and Opportunities**

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## **Abstract**

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (VG SSF), endorsed by the 31<sup>st</sup> Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in June 2014, are a major achievement towards ensuring secure and sustainable small scale fisheries. Significant is that the VG SSF make a serious attempt to include the role of women in small scale fisheries; they address issues of importance for women's lives and livelihoods and attempt to ensure gender sensitive policies and measures. By applying a gender lens to the VG SSF, this note synthesises all the articles of the VG SSF of importance for gender equality in small scale fisheries and assesses the opportunities and limitations. The note concludes that the VG SSF, despite several weaknesses, do provide an opportunity for a transformative plan of action for implementation and key strategies are identified.

## **Introduction**

National fisheries policies and international fisheries conventions, codes of conduct and other instruments, including the 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, generally are gender-blind. This contributes to discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation of women in the fisheries

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sector. For countries that have adopted these instruments, this means that they have lost and are losing the crucial potentiality of women's contribution to sustainable development of the sector as well as the well-being of fishing communities and families.

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (VG SSF or the Guidelines), endorsed by the 31st Session of COFI in June 2014 looks to make a crucial shift in this regard. This paper seeks to put into perspective the Guidelines in the context of gender and discusses the implications for implementation of the same from a gender perspective.

## **Materials and Methods**

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (VG SSF) was published in 2015 (FAO 2015). The foreword says *The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) is the first internationally agreed instrument dedicated entirely to the immensely important - but until now often neglected – small-scale fisheries sector.* The note that follows is an analysis of the content of the VG SSF. It focuses on the references in the various chapters and clauses of the guidelines from a gender perspective and attempts to discuss the implications.

## **Results & Discussion**

### ***Understanding the Guidelines***

The Guidelines recognise the importance of adhering to human rights standards and gender equality as fundamental to development and the vital role of women in small scale fisheries, and say that equal rights and opportunities should be promoted. They also recognise the importance of encouraging women's leadership and the elimination of prejudicial gender-based customary practices. The Guidelines make a serious attempt to be inclusive by referring to all actors and all activities in small scale fisheries – pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest, both commercial and subsistence and by emphasising the

community and inter-sectoral dimensions of small scale fisheries and the interdependency of activities in the community. In many sections the phrases “both men and women” or “including women” occur with specific attention on marginalised and vulnerable groups.

The Guidelines have a special chapter on Gender Equality (Chapter 8 of Part II of the Guidelines that deals with key issues of importance for “Responsible fisheries and sustainable development”). The text of this chapter has references to strategies such as gender mainstreaming and establishing policies and legislation to challenge discrimination against women and realise gender equality in small scale fisheries development.

From a gender perspective it is of particular importance that the text of this Chapter says: *States should endeavour to secure women’s equal participation in decision making for policies directed towards small scale fisheries.* And specific attention is paid towards encouraging women’s participation in fisheries organisations.

It also says that: *States should adopt specific measures to address discrimination against women, while creating spaces for civil society organisations, in particular for women fish workers and their organisations, to participate in the monitoring of their implementation.* The chapter also includes references for women’s equal access to extension services and technical access, including legal support and the development of “better technologies of importance and appropriate to women in small scale fisheries.”

The Guidelines provide several references that address key issues of importance to women in small scale fisheries and communities and the promotion of equal rights and opportunities in small scale fisheries development. These are about:

- Protecting and securing women’s tenure rights (Chapter 5.3, 5.4 and 5.12)
- The Guidelines support equitable distribution of benefits yielded from responsible management of fisheries and eco-systems, rewarding small scale fishworkers both men and women. Equal

participation of women in fisheries management should be ensured (Chapter 5.15 and 5.18)

- Women's rights of social development, employment and decent work (Chapter 6.2, 6.4, 6.7, 6.13)
- Support for woman's role in the post-harvest chain (Chapter 7.2).
- The most explicit reference from a gender perspective is the one which deals with violence and where the text says: *All parties should take steps to institute measures that aim to eliminate violence and to protect women exposed to such violence in small scale fishing communities. States should ensure access to justice for victims of violence, abuse etc. including within the household and the community* (Chapter 6.9).

The Guidelines emphasise the importance of policy coherence and the promotion of holistic and inclusive development strategies, with special attention to be paid to ensuring gender equity and equality. In Part III of the document "Ensuring an enabling environment and supporting implementation." there are some important references to:

- Gender sensitive policies in spatial planning (Chapter 10.2)
- Production of gender-disaggregated data in official statistics (Chapter 11.1)
- Recognition of the specific knowledge of women fishers and fishworkers (Chapter 11.6)
- Integration of gender analysis in SSF research and programme planning in order to inform strategies for ensuring equitable benefits for men and women in fisheries. (Chapter 11.10)
- Design and use of gender sensitive approaches, indicators and data, for monitoring purposes to capture how interventions have contributed towards social change (Chapter 11.10, 13.4).
- Ensure the equitable participation of women in representative structures in small scale fisheries subsector along the entire value chain.
- Enable women to organise autonomously at various levels on issues of particular relevance to them. (Chapter 12.1)
- Securing "the effective dissemination of information on gender and women's role in small scale fisheries and to highlight steps that need to be taken to improve women's status and their work." (Chapter 13.3)

### ***Implications for implementation of the Guidelines from a gender perspective***

The Guidelines recognise the importance of adhering to human rights standards and gender equality as fundamental to development. The Guidelines have several references that address women in small scale fisheries and communities and the promotion of equal rights and opportunities in small scale fisheries development. Nevertheless these references are generally found rather scattered in the text and are not very explicit.

While having a specific chapter on Gender Equality could be considered as a major strength of the Guidelines, it could also be seen as a weakness. From a gender perspective, the Guidelines would have been much stronger if gender had been integrated as a cross-cutting issue. By cross-cutting issues we mean that general principles such as human rights, rights of indigenous peoples, gender equality, and a sustainable environment cut across other issues. For example, the issue of sustainable resource management will affect men differently than women, where women of the community do not have the right or opportunity to participate equally and have no access to decision making on the resource management measures. Or many indigenous communities generally do not have individual rights to resources, so how for example will the introduction of an individual quota regime affect such communities? Such interactions of issues would need to be highlighted in the text and addressed in the implementation of the Guidelines.

Not only would this have led to more systematic and explicit references to key issues of importance to women in small scale fisheries and communities, but also where and how these differ from those of men. Key issues include voice and decision making, education and knowledge, decent work and income, livelihood opportunities, appropriated technology, and issues that affect women specifically, such as reproductive health and rights, violence against women, women in conflict areas and areas with environmental/natural resources crises or displacement due to land grabbing or development projects and export- oriented growth policies.

Nowhere in the document, not even in the chapter on Gender Equality (Chapter 8), is it explained what gender issues in small scale fisheries are exactly and what are the impacts of the unequal social (power) relations

between men and women for a sustainable development of small scale fisheries and the well-being of communities. Women of small scale fishing communities generally have become marginalised in the fisheries (value) chain, if not pushed out of it; they have limited access to resources; their work, knowledge and capacities are generally poorly recognised and valued; and their interest is often not represented. For instance when fishermen insist that locally consumed varieties of fish can now be exported because it is more lucrative for them; this denies women fish for local sale and processing and also food for the local communities (Salagrama 2012). Women also struggle with the burden of double workloads, productive and domestic, and poor working conditions as the state does not feel it is important to make investments in such supportive infrastructure while it may subsidise inputs in fishing (Vijayan 1992). Lack of legal protection and social security, taboos and prejudices, and often also sexual violence and psychological humiliation all take their toll on women and these are little addressed.

There is a tendency in the Guidelines to rely on gender mainstreaming and other measures of a more technical nature – making sure that policies are in place, for example, or promoting procedures – instead of advancing a substantive agenda for social change. Practice has shown that “gender mainstreaming” is a concept which generally is poorly understood and applied.

Researchers, policy makers and practitioners are often blind to social differentiation, including gender. Although generally development interventions are thought to be “gender neutral”, this is rarely the case. In addition, “women in development” interventions often do not pay any attention to inter- sectionality, to how social inequalities such as those based on class, ethnicity and age impact women in particular contexts in distinctive ways. Projects and programmes often bring new resources such as training, tools, technology, credit, assets, etc. and often new institutional arrangements, e.g., co- management, access rights systems, are created through which benefits can be claimed, such as access to decision making. Existing social inequalities, and in particular gender inequalities, will influence who is able to take advantage of these opportunities and who is not.

The emphasis of the Guidelines on an inclusive approach (women,

vulnerable groups, indigenous communities) can be considered as one of the strengths of the Guidelines. However an inclusive approach is no guarantee for equal benefits of policies and programmes. In many societies women (and women's organisations) in small scale fisheries are also often subjected to patronising attitudes of policy makers or leaders of fishers' organisations or male family members, with little opportunity to make their own decisions on issues of importance to their lives, livelihoods and wellbeing. There are many examples of micro-credit or assets like fish ponds given to women of fishing communities, but then the benefits of these being claimed by their husbands or other male family members.

A major limitation of the Guidelines is their voluntary nature and this is explicitly emphasised in Chapter 2 (Nature and Scope) the text says these guidelines should be interpreted and applied in accordance with national legal systems and their institutions. This reference is repeatedly made in the Guidelines. National legal systems and their institutions generally reflect prevailing gender relations and other social inequalities. In societies with rigid gender relations, what this means is that the text of the Guidelines concerning gender equality and women's participation may not be applied or be applied in only a limited way.

To achieve gender equality in small scale fisheries development it is vital to ensure that both men and women are recognised for each of their important roles and receive equitable distributional benefits and thereby sustain small scale fisheries as a whole. This needs the following six measures. First, women's equal rights to participate in all aspects (including decision making) of resource management as well as in the social, economic, political, cultural and organisational life of artisanal and small scale fishing communities should be recognised and promoted. Second, women's work (paid and unpaid) should be made visible, e.g., through the collection of gender disaggregated data, recognised and explicitly valued in both inland and marine fisheries in all aspects of the fisheries chain. Third, the problem of the "double work load" that women carry needs to be recognised, by means of an equal division of domestic and community work between men and women and access to public services, such as child care services, community restaurants, etc. that relieve the domestic workload. Fourth, women should be guaranteed full access to legal protection and social security systems, and rights related to

health, social security and retirement. Fifth, any cultural value system that promotes and “legitimises” oppression, exploitation and even violence against women must be changed. Sixth, national budgets must be made gender responsive to ensure that they take account of the needs of women and girls, and men and boys equally and investments are made in gender responsive awareness and capacity building programmes and in increasing bargaining power of women.

For example, Community-based Resources Management (CBCRM) is a form of co-management, where a community-based approach is seen as an opportunity to foster empowerment of local resource user groups by recognising their rights, knowledge and needs and enhancing their chances and capacities to see their needs and protect themselves against powerful interests from outside the community. Decision making about access to coastal resources, conflict resolution and sharing of responsibilities and benefits is the exclusive right of the community members. This implies active participation of the community members and an equitable sharing of rights and responsibilities. Such forms of community-based resource management provide the opportunity to reduce or avoid intra-community and intra-household conflicts and inequities, including those related to gender. There are several success stories of CBCRM projects where access rights of women are guaranteed and women take a lead role in the management of the resources and have benefitted from the results (Quist and Potalan- De la Cruz 2008).

The integration of a gender perspective in small scale fisheries needs an action plan that would imply actions that make visible and challenge the underlying root causes of gender injustice and inequality, including those resulting from patriarchal norms. The international Shared Gender Agenda agreed in July 2010 at the international workshop “Recasting the Net: Defining a Gender Agenda for Sustaining Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities” (ICSF 2010) can be an inspiration for this.

In these respects, women fish workers, representatives of fish worker organisations and non- governmental organisations (NGOs), social activists, policy makers and researchers need to work together in three major ways.



First, they need to apply an in depth gender analysis of fisheries (resources and chain) and the policies, institutions and organisations that specially affect women of fishing communities: What are the social norms, values and practices that determine gender roles and gender power relations? What determines marginalisation, exclusion, exploitation, discrimination of women: at the household level, at the community level, at the working place, at the market place? This will necessitate that institutions and organisations also examine their own practices and policies and ensure that their members and staff are aware of and understand these issues.

Second, they must identify and give voice to the strategic needs of women in small-scale fisheries and fishing communities and not only their practical needs. Strategic needs are issues that 1) are key to women's empowerment like voice and decision making, education and knowledge, decent work and income, appropriate means of production, and 2) affect women specifically, such as reproductive health and rights, violence against women, women in conflict areas and areas with environmental/natural resources crises or displacement due to land grabbing or development projects.

Third, they must monitor and nurture social change, finding evidence of change of gender relations and related norms and practices and of realisation of women's rights, and of participation of both women and men in this process. And in this we need to link all levels: micro, meso and macro. Searching for locally adapted practice, identifying how successful approaches, such as alternatives from below may be brought to scale. The crucial importance of early and regular documenting and monitoring should be taken to heart. All need to join hands to develop functional systems by which knowledge is accumulated and shared.

Key to the above is the need to identify those models of development that exacerbate gender inequities through their exploitative approach to both natural and human resources and to strive for alternative, transformative approaches to development that seek to eliminate unequal social relations and thereby promote a human rights-based and sustainable small scale fisheries development.

## Conclusion

It remains to be seen how the Guidelines will be interpreted and applied by States and other relevant parties, including fisheries organisations. Women's rights and gender issues are generally seen as issues of a sensitive nature and often meet resistance, denial or are accorded low priority.

In small scale fisheries, development policies have traditionally targeted women as fish processors and fish vendors and women's groups typically received micro-credit. Fisheries-related development policies have targeted men as exploiting, and sometimes managing, resources whereas women have been excluded from planning "mainstream" fisheries development (FAO 2007). And if women of fishing communities have access to these "mainstream" fisheries programmes and projects it is often through a male family member, e.g., husband, father, brother, rather than holding rights of their own. Without recognition of the prevailing gender and other social relations, and their value systems, social inequalities will be reinforced or worsened.

In general the text of the Guidelines easily can be interpreted as if the terms "gender" and "women" are synonymous. The message "Stop fixing women, start fixing the context" looks to be applicable here.

The Guidelines certainly open up opportunities for actors in the small-scale fisheries, including women, to make their voices heard, work together and lay down their agenda. However, it should be ensured that they are not approached as merely "objects of development solutions", but as "agents of social change". Therefore it is of crucial importance that civil society organisations, including women-in-fisheries organisations, promote a human rights-based approach to small scale fisheries development and jointly work out an action agenda for implementation of the Guidelines that focuses on transformative change for an equitable, gender, and sustainable small scale fisheries development.

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The author wishes to dedicate this note to Chandrika Sharma, who is missing with flight MH370 and whose sincere commitment to gender justice in fisheries will not be forgotten.

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