

# Strengthening the role of women in the marine fisheries sector of South Asia

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**T**he marine fisheries sector in South Asia (in the present context comprising Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka) is traditionally a sector of family-oriented artisanal activity. In a typical fisher family, men would usually engage in production-oriented activities such as fish harvesting or navigating the vessel, while women would by and large engage in post-harvest activities such as distribution and marketing. These traditional roles of women in fisheries have changed over time but their contributions to the overall development of the fisheries sector in the region remain significant.

The 1970s brought the first change when capital-intensive powered vessels were introduced in marine fisheries in the region. This change saw the emergence of commercial fishing enterprises from hitherto family-based, small, non-powered fishing units. At the same time, improved communication

and transportation infrastructure also led to the growth of markets, extending from village boundaries to national limits and beyond.

These developments created both challenges and opportunities for fisherwomen. The challenges came from disturbances in traditional supply and distribution channels as production units moved away from a particular village to fish landing centres and fishing harbours catering to several villages, towns and cities. On the other hand, a larger market also increased opportunities for better price realization and upscaling business activity. It also created the scope of employment in post-harvest activities such as processing, fish drying and so on.

The Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), a precursor of the present Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO), was in the forefront



Drying small fish in Negombo, Sri Lanka

Image: S. Jayaraj



Image: S Jayaram

Chennai Fishing Harbour, India: fisherwomen now negotiate prices through their cell phones

in the region working with governments and communities in ushering technological and infrastructural development in the fisheries sector. The programme also identified the changing needs of women in the sector. A range of innovative interventions geared at enhancing women's capacity to engage in the market were planned and implemented, including introduction of new activities like seaweed farming, fish marketing, adult education and the formation of self-help groups (SHGs).

However, in the absence of good gender statistics, it has been difficult to measure the trend and extent of women's participation in the fisheries sector in the region. Approximately 4 million people in the region derive their livelihoods from fishing and fishing-allied activities, of which about 10-15 per cent are women. In India, marine fishers are a well-identified sociocultural group. The total fisher population in the country including adults and children is about 4 million (2010), of which 1.92 million are women. In Sri Lanka, about 275,046 peoples are employed in marine fisheries sector, of which, 14,643 (7 per cent) are women (2015). Whereas in the inland capture and culture fisheries, women constitute 5 per cent of the workforce. In Bangladesh, of the total workforce in fisheries (inland, marine and aquaculture), about 10 per cent are women. In Maldives, women constitute about 11 per cent of

### Securing women's role in fisheries

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries (VG-SSF) is an international effort in securing women's role in fisheries.

Rights and duties are the cornerstone of any successful governance mechanism. The 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), which documented best practices in fisheries governance, arguably focused on this. To further support implementation of the CCRF, in June 2014, 143 FAO member countries adopted the VG-SSF. As the title suggests, these guidelines focus on small-scale fisheries, which constitute about 90 per cent of the global fishery.

The VG-SSF aims at ensuring human rights and dignity, gender equality and equity, transparency and rule of law, participation, accountability and social responsibility by empowering small-scale fishing communities, including both men and women, to participate in decision-making processes, and to assume responsibilities for sustainable use of fishery resources. At the same time, the differences between women and men have been acknowledged and the guidelines suggest that specific measures should be taken to accelerate de facto equality. The guidelines call for the state to secure equitable and appropriate tenure rights to fishery resources (marine and inland) with special attention paid to women. The guidelines also call for ending all types of discrimination against women and ensuring secure workplaces and fair wages while providing them with the necessary support to avail different resources — such as finance and training.





Image: S. Jayaram

Building awareness among fisherwomen in Chittagong, Bangladesh

the total workforce in fisheries. They are mostly engaged in post-harvest operations, mainly in the production of Maldives Fish — a smoked and dried fish preparation. It may be also noted that apart from technology and market constraints, sociocultural norms also determine women's participation in economic activities in the region.

In the case of India, national marine fisheries censuses were carried out in 2005 and 2010. The census data shows that women constitute the majority of the workforce in fishing-allied activities. Between the two censuses, women in the workforce in fishing-allied activities increased from 48 per cent in 2005 to about 60 per cent in 2010 — an increase of about 2 per cent per year during 2005-2010. The largest concentration of women in the workforce is in peeling, followed by processing and marketing. The data also shows that women are increasingly participating in other allied activities such as net mending.

Several factors have possibly contributed to the successful migration of women from a traditional family-oriented artisanal sector to more market-oriented fisheries activities. At the top level, various women-centric policies of the national governments, ranging from training programmes in skill and capacity-building to rural banking and micro-finance, have been the positive contributing factors. These

efforts were supplemented by regional and international organizations such as BOBP, FAO and other international developmental agencies, bringing both technology and funds. Finally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations have contributed to the last mile of connectivity.

At the national level, the 1998 National Fisheries Policy of Bangladesh identified “Poverty alleviation through creation of self-employment opportunities and improvement in socioeconomic conditions of the fishers” as a major objective. The policy further calls for encouragement of women in fish culture through training and capacity-building. The more recent 2014 National Shrimp Policy of Bangladesh has called for improving women's participation in shrimp production, processing and marketing as well as proper implementation of national and international labour standards in the shrimp industry. The women's workforce in the sector is likely to benefit from such intervention. In addition Vision 2021, declared by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, has also called for improving women's participation in fisheries to an average of 20 per cent from the current level. On the other hand, Grameen Bank, which pioneered microfinance and micro-credit in 1970 and won the Nobel Peace Prize for its effort in 2006, has helped in unlocking productive resources in rural



### Unlocking entrepreneurship in fisherwomen in Bangladesh

During the mid-1980s BOBP worked with the fisher community in the Jaldia-Shamipur village of Chittagong District, Bangladesh on several issues aiming to uplift the community. A socioeconomic survey in 1985 revealed that indebtedness was a major issue, with 62 per cent of the fishing families in debt and 35 per cent having no savings. About 94 per cent of children were suffering from malnutrition, with 23 per cent facing severe (third degree) malnutrition.

For women, economic empowerment meant 'more scope for fish marketing'. The women also believed that although they worked as hard as men, they were denied equal status, both in the family and in the community.

The project tried the participatory approach to improve their living standard. First, the women were helped to organize themselves into small groups, and second, in consultation with them a menu of possible livelihood activities was identified. Since fishing activities were seasonal and not remunerative enough to meet their basic needs, it was envisaged that diversifying the economic activities could at least reduce seasonal risks and hopefully more income would be generated. Different activities, such as fish marketing (traditional), animal husbandry and poultry were introduced. In addition, education-cum-action programmes on health, sanitation and nutrition were also launched. Apart from the Government and BOBP, agencies such as the Grameen Bank and local and national NGOs participated. Dedicated community workers were engaged for hand-holding and interest-free loans were provided with no fixed payment schedule for new activities. Within 8-12 months most of the women's groups paid back over 50 per cent of the loans. Most of the groups also reported saving 10 per cent or more.

Post-project, local NGOs carried the model forward in other areas.

Twenty years later, BOBP-IGO engaged with another fisher community in Chakoria village — about 100 kilometres south of Chittagong under the Global Project on Safety at Sea. The community was still suffering from many structural problems — such as low catch, high risks of accident while fishing and increasing population. However, the village was more vibrant in terms of economics as most families were engaged in additional livelihood activities such as sewing, animal husbandry and/or poultry. The most significant change was in the attitude of women as they were playing



Image: S Jayaraj

Tailoring is an alternative source of livelihood for fisherwomen in Chittagong, Bangladesh

a leading role in many areas, including helping their menfolk with cyclone warnings and so on. Something seems to have changed within 20 years — apart from better economic engagement, women have started playing an important role in decision-making and leadership.

### Developing a market for fisherwomen in Besant Nagar

The Fish Marketing Society of Besant Nagar Fisherwomen in Chennai has just completed its twenty-fifth year of establishment. Twenty five years back these women came from two small fishing villages located in close proximity within the city limits of Chennai. Competing with each other and facing problems in marketing their fish, life for these women was full of hardships. They neither had a designated place nor adequate supply to earn enough.

BOBP met this group in the late 1980s and the first challenge was to unite them. This was done through dedicated training programmes mixed problem solving exercises, simulation and games designed to value cooperation and leadership. The training brought confidence and the fisherwomen negotiated with the City Corporation for a designated marketplace to conduct business. While BOBP developed the market design, the City Corporation in consultation with the fisherwomen constructed the market. Meanwhile, the women set up a formal society and started collecting funds.

By July 1990 the market was completed and the fisherwomen entered into a lease agreement with the corporation and began operating from the market. How did it make an impact? In their own words, earlier they used to procure small amounts of fish from the landing sites, mostly from their family boats. Now they buy fish from open auction. Their price realization has also increased many fold. Selling fish from their own market also raised their self-esteem and decision-making power. The lessons learned were never forgotten. Subsequently, the market complex underwent many ups and downs but the women have struggled hard to maintain it. BOBP (and later BOBP-IGO) have continued to assist these fisherwomen in developing their enterprise and providing need-based assistance from time to time.



Image: S Jayaraj

A fisherwoman vending fish through her retail shop in Chennai, India



Image: Y S Yadava

A stakeholder consultation with fisherwomen from Mudasalodai Fish Landing Centre, Tamil Nadu, India

Bangladesh as well as encouraging savings and creating rural capital through the formation of SHGs.

In Maldives, women are largely engaged in the production of Maldives Fish or smoked and dried tuna. Therefore, the extent of their participation is determined by the availability of fresh tuna. In recent years, the Government of Maldives has encouraged the domestic fishing fleet to target both skipjack and yellowfin tuna. The Government has also recently announced the Fisheries and Agriculture Diversification Programme, under which soft loans (at 6 per cent interest) will be provided to cooperative societies for value addition and enhancing productivity.

In Sri Lanka, as in the other countries of the region, women are mostly involved in fish processing and to a small extent in marketing. The role of women is more visible in inland fisheries and fish farming. The policy objective of the Government of Sri Lanka is to ensure sustainable production through community participation. The legal framework of the country emphasizes stakeholder consultation — which potentially engages women in the decision-making processes.

In India, women have played multiple roles in fisheries, apart from their key role in raising the family. Policy supports have facilitated improvements in their skills, the formation of women's cooperatives and SHGs and access to credit. Besides their traditional role in post-harvest activities, involvement is diversifying to areas such as seaweed farming and other mariculture activities. The new draft Marine Fisheries Policy of 2016 aims to strengthen the role of women in fisheries. It proposes that the “Government will ... further enhance support by way of forming women cooperatives; women-friendly financial support schemes; good working conditions that would include safety, security and hygiene and transport facilities for retail marketing; encouragement to take up small-scale fishing, value addition activities; and also play an active

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role in fisheries management.” In addition, it also suggests that the coastal provinces should consider increasing the area presently reserved for artisanal fishing. Such an action could see the revival of the role of women in active fishing as artisanal fishing mainly comprises the marginal section of society catering to local markets. The policy objective of reduction in post-harvest losses could help ensure better financial remuneration for women engaged in fisheries.

In spite of the multidimensional roles of women in fisheries, their contributions often go unnoticed. There are several reports of discrimination in wages and working conditions, especially in the processing sector. Various social indicators such as sex ratio and literacy rate also suggest that there is a need to empower women. While these features may be a reflection of society at large, in the context of fisheries, it implies that women in practice are far from the decision-making processes at the macro level.

Experiences so far on the involvement of women in the marine fisheries sector show that the removal of constraints can lead to their productive engagement. The first constraint is that despite women playing a significant role in distribution and post-harvesting, they do not have much power to influence the process. The second constraint is that their role in economic activities is not reflected in their social status as captured in sex ratio and literacy rate differentials. The third constraint is that unlike men, examples of successful women's enterprises show the necessity of group effort. In other words, solo ventures by women possibly have little chance of success. These factors could inhibit unlocking the full potential of women in enterprise and decision-making. While these constraints are mostly part of the position of women in the larger society, the fisheries sector can bring in changes by moving to principles as described in the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Small-scale Fisheries Governance.