Women and children make highly significant but undervalued contributions to fisheries, aquaculture, fish processing, retailing and fisheries sector services, according to the experts who gathered on 13th November 1998 in Chiang Mai, Thailand at the First International Symposium on Women in Asian Fisheries. Appropriately, the Symposium was conducted in Thailand during the Fifth Asian Fisheries Forum. Thailand is the biggest exporter of seafood in the world today and women play a big role in the Thai fisheries sector, including holding 33% of professional positions in the central Directorate of Fisheries, according to the Director General of Fisheries, Mr Dhammarong Prakobboon, who spoke at the Opening.

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Agriculture Census Must Cover Gender Questions as Well

Knowledge of the contributions of women in the fisheries sector is only evolving slowly and still lags behind that of other rural sectors in Asian countries. The presenters concluded that one way to help rectify this situation would be for the governments in Asia to cover gender questions on fisheries and aquaculture in their regular agricultural censuses. The participants were urged to go back to their ministries of agriculture and alert them to this vehicle for data collection. Despite the lack of comprehensive data, the Symposium learnt from several programmes and studies in India, Bangladesh and the Philippines that agricultural banks and non-government organisations are already helping hundreds of thousands of women entrepreneurs and fish producers through technical assistance, loans and credit and fostering self-help groups.

Gender Relations Not competitive, but Complementary

The Symposium recognised that Asian women in fisheries usually play multiple roles in their lives and careers, thus making time allocation a critical issue to address when developing assistance programmes. Men's and women's sense of confidence and self-worth are intrinsically linked and embedded in their culture. Therefore, social support systems need to be organised to help bring about changes that may be resisted at first. Gender relations should not be seen as competitive but rather as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Support systems should also help to raise the aspiration levels of women. More generally, formal service and delivery agencies are realising that they can only do their jobs these days if they are gender sensitive and more participatory with their clients, through involving fish farmers in designing curricula for farmers' field schools. In most cases, this means a major internal effort in organisational transformation. The workshop learned how some non-governmental organisations have already embarked on these internal cultural changes.

Women in the sector are marginalised in planning and policy-making and unless this is changed, they will continue to suffer inequalities and discrimination. Even some Asian women fisheries scientists and academics rated their chances of making a significant policy contribution as "hopeless." Several speakers stressed that community-based coastal resources management is one activity that would only be successful if both men and women are active in it. Although such management is becoming more inclusive of stakeholder groups generally, women are still rarely involved.

Women Paid Below the Minimum Wage

Women frequently participate in the fisheries sector under conditions of great inequality, bordering on blatant exploitation, from their participation in the labour force. Young and unmarried women are often preferred because they are cheaper to employ and have fewer family responsibilities. Studies show that women labourers in some offshore fisheries in the Philippines and in fish processing plants in India are paid below the minimum wage, receive little basic health and welfare benefits and, because they lack power and legal protection, could even be exposed to sexual harassment on the job. Such labour and personal discrimination is often well hidden because the women can not speak out and their basic human rights are not adequately protected.
Speakers at the Symposium revealed the results of studies that show that women are productive and efficient when they have access to the right technologies and opportunities. Studies in Malaysia and other countries indicate, however, that more than 80% of rural women’s activities are carried out in or close to the home. New technologies and modernisation in the fisheries sector tend to marginalise these backyard activities. The developments include the introduction of large-scale, centralised fish processing aimed at high quality export markets and the mechanisation of fishing vessels. However, small-scale aquaculture, low capital fish processing, value-added fish products, rice-fish farming, and rearing of fingerlings from fry are examples of fisheries activities well suited to cottage industries. In addition, complementary activities such as tourist lodgings, handicrafts and seasonal farming show promise for diversifying, stabilising and supplementing fishing family incomes.

Too Much Talk -Not Enough Action

Attention to women’s issues in fisheries lags behind that in other sectors and since this Symposium was a first for the Asian Fisheries Society, various comments on it were raised. For example, other attendees at the Fifth Asian Fisheries Forum suggested to some of the experts that there was too much talk and not enough action!

To demonstrate their intentions, the speakers pointed out that some agencies with which they were involved, including banks, non-government agencies and some government departments, had already made major strides in helping women’s contributions in the fisheries sector.

The participants will broadcast their findings through the proceedings of the Symposium that will be published in collaboration with ICLARM. The results will also be distributed to sectoral magazines read by policy-makers, and by spreading the message through personal actions and networks such as the Mekong Women in Fisheries Network. In addition, the participants have written to urge the Asian Fisheries Society to maintain the momentum built up at the Symposium through taking the following actions itself:

Action Needed

1. Continue the “women in fisheries” photographic competition at the Sixth Asian Fisheries Forum in Taipei in 2001. The competition started in 1995 at the Fourth Asian Fisheries Forum in Beijing. The 1998 competition drew 54 entries, many of outstanding quality and some of these will be used in regional and international fisheries magazines such as Naga, Aquaculture Asia, INFOFISH and Catch and Culture.

2. Sponsor another Women in Fisheries Session at the Sixth Asian Fisheries Forum and ensure that this does not clash with related sessions such as rural aquaculture. Early planning could make this special session into a global Forum on Women in Fisheries, showing the world that Asia not only leads the world in fish production, but in addressing some of the major social, economic and political issues in the fisheries sector.

3. Select both men and women keynote speakers at each forum and major conference or workshop.

4. Ensure gender equity in selecting session chairs for the Forum.

5. Undertake a self-analysis of its gender sensitivity and encourage the branches to do this to reach down to the grass-roots level.

6. Strive for gender equity in the Council, while upholding the principle of merit and the balance of nationalities.

More general recommendations from the Symposium included:

1. Training and extension programmes in fisheries should specifically target women in areas where they contribute to fisheries activities.

2. Microcredit programmes, along the lines of the successful programmes in Bangladesh and India, should be tried to benefit women in other countries too. Networks should be formed at the national level with the active participation of all the actors. Actions initiated by the Mekong River Commission to form networks in each of the four riparian countries along the Mekong River should serve as examples for others in the region. The Asian Fisheries Society could help the National branches/organisations to take the lead in the formation of national networks.

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