

Opportunities for gender equality in fisheries and coastal resource management in South and Southeast Asia



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Photo (above): Villagers in Stung Treng province, Cambodia, are relieved when they do catch fish from the Mekong River as they recognize there are fewer these days © SAVANN OEURM / OXFAM

Exploring gendered experiences

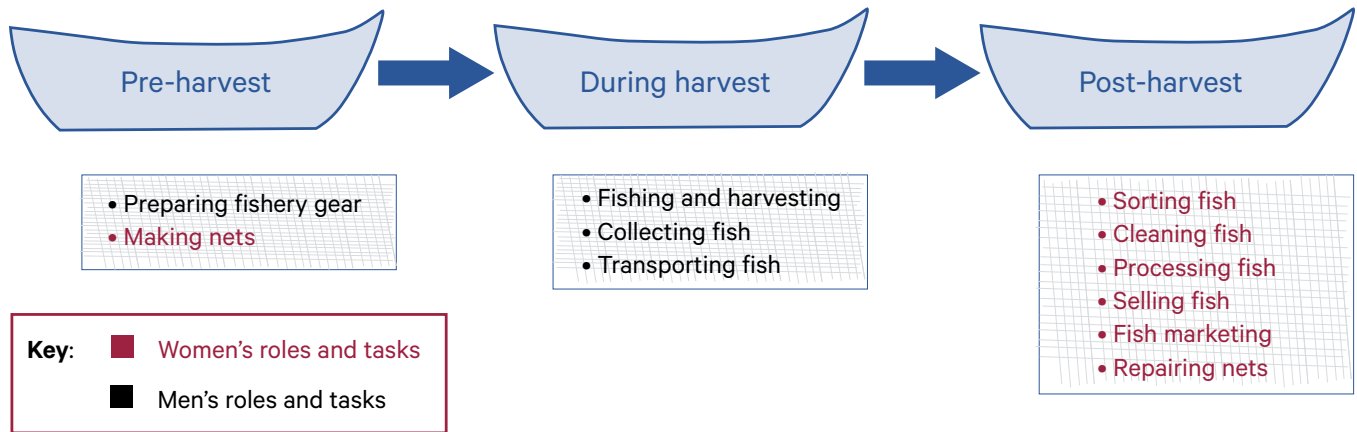
Coastal communities in South and Southeast Asia are strongly tied to marine and coastal resources that are vital for their food security and livelihoods. Meanwhile, pervasive expansion of the global economy is leading to rapid changes in coastal and marine resources, specifically through overfishing and hasty coastal development. Such rapid changes produce severe consequences for different groups of women and men in local communities that are at the front line in terms of experiencing the hardships of marine resource depletion and coastline degradation. Furthermore, these hardships often lead to changes in gender roles and rights.

However, gendered experiences in fisheries and coastal resource management are often overlooked. To close some of these knowledge gaps, current work from the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) explored drivers of inequality and the constraints imposed on different groups of women in various coastal contexts of South and Southeast Asia.¹ Our work is based on three general sources: a literature review, 12 policy analyses and 12 individual gender-focused field studies. Key findings from this work include:

- **Women and young girls have diverse roles and responsibilities, yet their contributions are often undervalued.** Social and gender norms regarding men and women's physical and/or religious abilities to engage with the ocean and its resources have created distinct perceptions about occupations that are more appropriate for men or for women. Men's roles concentrate on marine harvest and fishing stages, while women concentrate their activity in the post-harvest stages. Cultural norms favour the roles of men, perceived as capabilities requiring great physical strength and remarkable stamina. In contrast, women's activities are undervalued, especially their non-direct roles in adding-value to economic gains – often considered as unremarkable extensions of their never-ending domestic and care-giving chores. This is how women's labour becomes invisible. Figure 1 presents an overall division of gender roles. This division, however, is widely context-dependent and is contingent upon other axes of power and upon differences such as ethnicity, caste, class and nationality – identifications that are subject to constant change and contestation.

¹ Research conducted in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam

Figure 1: General division of productive roles and tasks between men and women in the fishery sector



- Women's and young girls' participation in decision-making remains negligible at all economic levels.** Patriarchal social norms that confine women to the domestic sphere and care work often result in exclusion of women from meetings on local natural resource management. Even if such an opportunity arises, many women are reluctant to take on additional management responsibilities due to the demands of their care-giving roles. At the same time, the domestic violence, prevalent in several of the surveyed communities, can further propel or entrench women into submissive roles. Together with women's constrained education rates, these factors severely affect self-esteem. Finally, when cultural norms collude to limit their public visibility, women may withdraw from the economic, consultative and decision-making arenas. All these circumstances combine to prevent women, and other marginalized groups, from fully contributing to important public debates, such as open deliberation about adaptations to a changing climate. Women's negligible participation in public decision-making reverberates throughout the levels of economic activity: Even within more technical policy spheres, such as marine and coastal resource management, women's representation remains low.



Net upkeep is a never ending job along the Tonle Sap system in Cambodia, according to this woman who traps small fish in her nets © SEIHA TIEP / OXFAM

- Political and economic processes deepen gender inequalities.** Multi-scale processes of the political sphere and national legislation perpetuate gender inequalities in both coastal communities and the fisheries sector. Inevitably, escalations in infrastructure development, resource commodification, market access and transnational investment are changing the power and gender relationships within communities; unfortunately, too often these changes are too often the further disempowerment and deprivation of already fragile components of the population, including poorer women, ethnic communities, and/or lower castes. For instance, industrialized fishing can displace small-scale fisheries, as the benefits of the growth in value and productivity of the fisheries sector and of aquaculture rarely trickle down to small local producers. Too often, women bear the brunt of efforts to compensate for dwindling fish harvests through more intensive caregiving for the sick and elderly and through taking on supplementary livelihood alternatives to make ends meet. These additional burdens frequently result in both physical and emotional stress.

Gender mainstreaming in the policy landscape

While gender inclusion and equality are gaining traction within natural resource management, and some progress has been made to mainstream gender in the region's national legislation, adequate integration of gender

issues within coastal communities and their fisheries sector is still insufficient. Piecemeal and fragmented approaches present challenges that demand attention and gender and social equality issues get side-lined among the concerns of marine and coastal resources. Instead, efforts to develop technical, ecological, and/or economic aspects continue to be the sector's primary focus, leaving the drivers of inequality and vulnerability largely ignored. Examples include economic growth strategies that prioritize industrialized fishing practices, creating substantial and problematic challenges to small-scale fish catches and household food security. Once again, this type of trickle-down often increases women's caring burden as the source of ensuring family wellbeing in times of scarcity and livelihood stresses.

Further, despite women's crucial contributions to the fisheries sector – comprising almost half of the sector's labour force in developing countries– their work is often undocumented and therefore invisible to most policy makers. Many policies focus on the primary production

Table 1: Regional pathways and entry-points for transformation

Pathway	How?	Entry-point
1 Increase gender awareness among communities and project implementers	Inform and sensitize communities on gender issues and ensure that both men and women are able to contribute constructively in decision-making processes at the community and organizational level	Facilitate collective awareness raising and understanding of and learning about the benefits and values of women's work, the importance of joint decision-making and sharing tasks/responsibilities Develop and disseminate gender awareness materials in simple and easy to understand local language, together with interactive sessions, in schools and community gatherings Involve and collaborate with relevant institutions and organizations
2 Provide gender analysis training and support for local organizations, government institutions and project implementers	Enable project and local government stakeholders to systematically mainstream inclusive and intersectional gender practices in development planning and develop a common approach to tackling gender inequality	Increase gender-sensitization training for relevant institutions and ensure that it is contextualized for the specific project needs and area Shift away from more general gender trainings to target how gender concerns specifically can be mainstreamed in a coastal and marine resources projects Involve and collaborate with relevant institutions and organizations
3 Improve women's agency beyond decision making power and women's economic empowerment	Recognize women's ability to question and address underlying gender inequalities and support them by identifying potential for change	Facilitate participatory understanding of underlying inequalities and identification of strategies to address societal discriminatory norms Enhance social capital and create space for a collective voice as well as leadership Facilitate awareness raising to ensure women's work, both reproductive and fisheries work in pre- and post- harvest stages, is always recognized and valued Ensure implemented activities do not increase time burdens and hardship of women
4 Combat violence against women	Strengthen women and young girls' self-esteem and create enabling environments for empowerment	Include measures for combatting violence in coastal and marine resources project in a planned and integrated manner Increase awareness in local communities and in schools as educated children can change household dynamics and prevent violence Implement 'Child to parent' message delivery mechanism connected with community police to monitor violence Complement monitoring with 'child to child' support network
5 Break siloes between gender and coastal resource management policies	Promote integrated approaches to gender and coastal resource management at national level	Facilitate capacity building of national and local fisheries coastal resource management stakeholders Mainstream gender in policies and strategies that are in the process of being developed and/or create addendum policy/guidance to already adopted policies/strategies Encourage collaboration between and within government agencies and civil society. Facilitate experienced civil society organizations to share good gender integration practices Take advantage of ICM and transboundary approaches to coastal and marine resources management as all gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive efforts between national and local governments as well as local and international NGOs can be aligned

of fish over other parts of the supply chain, specifically the processing and marketing where women are represented in larger numbers and where benefits such as fair earnings and well-being are often weakest. In addition, while women's rights to livelihood and food security may exist on paper, many government officials and community members involved in coastal management remain unaware of these laws and policies.

At regional levels, a number of mechanisms guide the intergovernmental architecture of South and Southeast Asia's fisheries and management of coastal resources. These include the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia, the Action Plan for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment and Coastal Areas of the East Asian Seas Region and the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme. Although these mechanisms do not provide specific focus on integration of gender in their workings, a number of bodies and transboundary projects are making steady progress by considering gender issues in their mandate areas. The Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia Pacific and the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center are making steady progress by considering gender issues in their mandate areas. And while its actual application is limited in regions like Asia, integrated coastal management (ICM) has been promoted as an approach that can advance gender mainstreaming. This is due to ICM's strong focus on interactions between physical and human activities, on the promotion of harmonization among coastal and ocean sectors, and on a typically collaborative approach that provides the opportunity for effective gender mainstreaming through involvement of women's organizations or gender experts/specialists.

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Ensuring gender equality

While changes in the economy, environment and labour mobilities can be challenging in the context of increasing poverty, lack of livelihoods, violent conflicts and family separations, processes of change also work to raise questions within household and communities about how unequal norms and practices can be transformed to become more just.

Social norms and gender roles are not fixed. Changing circumstances can open up new opportunities for transforming gender discriminatory norms, perceptions and beliefs within the wider context of societal, local and global economic and political processes that could produce inequalities of different kinds.

Following this, some regional overarching pathways and entry-points for transformation are offered (Table 1). However, it is crucial to keep the goals in sight: meaningful transformations, longer term programming that understands and builds awareness about underlying causes of discrimination and inequality, and consideration of how this plays out for different groups of women.

Key resources

SEI, MFF, SEAFDEC (2018). Gender in coastal and marine resource management: A regional synthesis report. Bangkok, Thailand: MFF, 63pp

SEI, MFF, SEAFDEC (2018). Gender in coastal and marine resource management: A literature review. Bangkok, Thailand: MFF, 35pp

