Gender issues in Harvest and Post harvest sectors of Fisheries- Understanding fisheries from a gender perspective

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'Women hold up half the sky'.

This is a proclamation made by Mao Zedong. This holds exactly true for India, as women amount to about half the country's total population. So, there could be no emancipation for humanity without the participation and emancipation of half of society - its women.

Now coming to fisheries sector, 14 million people depend on fisheries for livelihood through different occupations. Out of its one billion population, 20 % are living in the coastal villages. India, having 3rd position in marine fisheries production and 2nd in Aquaculture is having a prominent position in the world fisheries map. 14 million people depend on fisheries for livelihood through different occupations. The contribution of fisheries to the GDP is around 1.4 % and about 5% to the Agriculture GDP.

Coming to these coastal villages of India, which make Fisheries the sunrise sector of our economy, the women's role is still higher. Though fisheries sector has long been considered as a male domain indicating the higher degree of risk and the ergonomic issues involved in the occupation, the fact is position of women is higher by statistics compared to men in most of the fishery activities. This can be easily understood if one can have a glance of the various labour intensive fishery activities like gleaning, processing, curing and marketing. And the role of fisheries is steadily increasing through food supply, generating job opportunities, raising nutritional level and foreign exchange earning. But these days, there arises a lot of discussion about the need for gendered approach in fisheries. Why?

What is gender?

Gender is the state of being male or female. The word gender has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term. The term is believed to be originated from, old French gendre based on Latin genus. The earliest meanings were kind, sort genus etc. But the word gender became popular by middle of 20th century.
What is the difference between sex and gender?

Sex refers to the biological differences, while gender refers to cultural or social ones. Gender and gender based differences expressed in personal or social contexts can never be attributed to only the biological differences, it is a cumulative effect of the cultural, social as well as psychological differences established through ages.

The role of women in fisheries sector- in a gender perspective

Data from nine significant fish producing countries, based on available national statistics and case studies, revealed that 47% of the labor force in the fisheries sector (including post-harvesting) is women (FAO, World Bank and WorldFish, 2008). If those in gleaning and aquaculture were also accounted, these figures could have been still higher. Employment in this sector is expanding.

As women form the majority engaged in post-harvesting in many countries( with very few exceptions where women are involving in harvesting occupations), revised estimates of employment in fisheries could indicate that the sector is predominantly a female one, challenging the long-held notion that fisheries is a male domain.

In India, fish is mostly regarded as only a secondary source of food. Under such circumstances, fishing communities receive a lower priority in state policies relating to food. The picture becomes shabbier when it comes to the women of this marginalized group. Their role in the fisheries sector remain invisible, with their contribution by way of manpower going unrecorded for the documentation of work participation in fisheries. Before going to the issues confronting women in fisheries, it would be better to have a quick look at the role they play in the sector;

Harvest sector

The presence of women in harvesting operations in the marine sector is very low. In some states like Tamilnadu and Andra pradesh, women help to pull the traditional crafts to shore, in which mostly their husbands or the close relatives might have brought fish from sea. Later they take over the responsibility of marketing the fish. In many areas including Kerala, women go for fry collection in traditional way using pots. When Pokkali ( half the year fish & half the year paddy) lands of Kerala are declining, the scene of women catching fry is also declining. In Andrapradesh, the women mainly involve in gathering fish while landing and collect molluscan shells. They also involve in clam & mussel collection from brackish water areas. The marine operations extend from few weeks to a month or more and distance of operation also expands. While the harvesting operations in marine sector become more and more technologically advanced, women’s scope of venturing into it becomes limited. Also, women are actively involved in sea weed collection and crab farming in Tamilnadu coast. Women indirectly contribute to the marine harvest process by mending
net, selling harvesting equipments etc. Also, in states like Maharashtra, fisherwomen are custodians of fishing boats and they give boats on lease to fisherfolk for fishing.

The role of women in Inland fish harvesting is more prominent. They are engaged in pond preparation, stocking of fingerlings, feeding harvesting etc in aquaculture ponds. In open water bodies, they do fishing from shore in some places. In the North-eastern states like Manipur, women go to deeper lakes in boats of unique design and catch fish in an interesting traditional method using an indigenous gear resembling the Chinese dip net of Kerala. During the voyage extending to 4-5 hours, they do sometimes have their children also in the boat.

Post-harvest Sector

The contribution of women is significantly high in post-harvest operations in fisheries. The entire processing sector is dependent on women as all most 90% of the prawn peeling and 70% of the processing of fish is performed by women. They also play a major role in fish (both fresh & dry) trading, curing, value addition and sorting work in major landing centres.

If we take the case of Kerala state alone as a case, out of the total working women force in fisheries, 45% are employed in prawn peeling centres, 24% in small scale fish trading, 16% in processing centres and the rest in small landing centres, fish curing etc. In Kerala women are involved in fish curing, pre-processing, and marketing. In Tamil Nadu, other than these roles, presence of women is there in sea weed collection and value addition also. In west Bengal, Orissa and Maharashtra, the presence of women in fish processing & marketing is very predominant. Other than these major direct roles, women play many indirect roles like taking additional responsibility of looking after all the needs including financial of the family in the household of a fisherman employed in mechanized fishing sector during his absence for weeks together. Also they run petty shops in landing centres, selling ancillary equipments for fishing, food stalls for fishing crews etc.

Though the potential of the coastal women folk for contributing to the development of fisheries is very high, slowly their opportunities are declining. This can be attributed to a great extent to the technological advancements that took place in the sector without keeping a gender balance.

Gender in fisheries - the major issues

Its employment that is of grave concern for us when we speak of gender issues in fisheries, while all other issues are rooted in the general social and cultural background. A livelihoods approach (Long, 2000; Allison and Horemans, 2005) better enables an understanding of how employment in the fisheries/aquaculture sector is embedded in other social, cultural, economic, political and ecological structures/processes that shape gender inequities and how these might be reduced. But due to the advent of mechanization in fishing sector, the fishing activity became industrial in nature. Highly advanced mechanized fishing boats, operating from major fishing harbours made fishing occupation a centralized nature. Though almost 70% of the
fish landed is going for domestic consumption, the fishing operations became export oriented. It has opened up some new employment opportunities for women in centralized peeling & processing centre sof r exporting firms. But the women had to travel from their residences to faraway places( oftento other states) & the job became seasonal, creating a feel of insecurity. This displaced women who were employed in the numerous small traditional landing centres. Usage of fishing nets made of improved synthetic materials made in big factories made women in net making jobless. The technological changes brought in to meet the increased demands for production & processed products didn’t equip women

Gender issues- Beyond Gender differentiation

Gender bias in division of labour- this is one of the major topic which is widely debated all over the world. The differentiation based on gender starts in the beginning itself...the jobs in fisheries has an invisible categorization as some for men only & women can do only some, which naturally fall into the inferior jobs and low paid. Even if few women also get into the same jobs as men, the next issue will come up;

Gender disparity in wages

The women who do same job of men in the same firm are not paid equal to the men. This is very prevalent in Agriculture sector. The ones who are responsible for the implementing the wage disparity has always got the justification of poor productivity of women. Here , the value of skill acquisition and time ( for eg; women from Alleppey district of Kerala who are well known as the best in the skill in India is paid low wages irrespective of the states they work).
So, the story of discrimination goes on it was being discussed from many years back. The gender based marginalization of women in fisheries sector is a topic of hot discussions in different national and international platforms which has paved way for many studies on her work participation in fisheries and the policy support they receive. This has lead to a plethora of studies and loud discussions.
Provisionally, we are on the right track as the development or in more specific terms, the empowerment, of the women can be made tangible mainly through assessing their economic empowerment ie., through rates of women getting employed in the sector. Because, economic empowerment is the foremost of all other kinds of empowerment like social, cultural and intellectual as it enable her to have an access to information and resources for growth in other sectors.
Apart from these, the generally reported constraints include, lack of access to information sources, lack of ownership of assets, no decision making power, no managerial efficiency, improper policy support, research programmes focusing and technological empowerment of women
Beyond gender bias in division of labour & wages...
But often, the focus of these discussions is limited to two main aspects; ie., gender bias in division of labour and wage disparity. But we have to move beyond this limit considering the globalization, market changes and growth of research in fisheries. What is needed is a redefining of the outlook for gender based development in fisheries, keeping an eye on the
changing consumption pattern, emerging market forces and technological developments fisheries sector.

The plans to be made for bringing in a sustainable development in the sector should surely include well define programmes for equipping the neglected, but productive half of the society. But the approached need to be women oriented considering the macro climate in fisheries. The development agenda in fisheries is set considering the future market demand and sustainability concerns. Keeping these in focus, we have to leap forward devising new programmes to bring the women folk in coastal villages forward. There has to be focused attempts considering the on the following lines;

Future perspective:

Gender friendly technology packages

Gender friendly technology packages are to be devised for equipping women to get employed in the changed regime of fisheries. For example, the creative & innovative potential of women in making food products is not yet tapped fully.

- A proper technology support will enable them to make sure that they play a key role in the smack food processing industry, which is promised to be the sunrise sector of India. Preparation of ready to eat and ready to fry products for urban market is another area where coastal women can excel. The products have growing demand in domestic as well as foreign markets. (The techno-preneurship models developed for value added products, dry fish, fresh fish, fish waste utilization, Bombay duck production etc under the NAIP project “Responsible harvesting and Utilization of Selected small pelagic & fresh water fishes” operated in CIFT with World bank support are examples of few such viable business models for women).

- Women can be supported for starting production units as well as run selling kiosks of these innovative products

- Women can be also equipped to acquire skills for production and servicing of modern fishing equipments.

- Advanced training for scientific aquaculture practices for farming commercially important and fast growing fishes, crab fattening and farming of bivalves ia another promising area

Policy support

In a democratic country like India, a political will can do wonders for bringing in improvement in a sector through focused ventures. Supportive schemes and policy decisions are to be made which customized to meet the demands of the sector

Financial

Most credit institutions have not been able to recognize them well enough to cater to their specific needs. Under such circumstances, the credit needs of women for fish marketing often get ignored. This keeps them dependent on exploitative non-institutional credit sources, which eventually prevent them from making a decent living. Remedial measures are to be urgently undertaken to solve this issue.
Managerial efficiency

This is a point of utmost importance as the reason for collapse of 90% of the failed initiatives by women entrepreneurs or women groups is attributed to improper management. Hence proper guidance & professional training is highly essential for enabling women in providing managerial inputs for their enterprises.

Research initiatives

Research initiatives are highly essential for two purposes; i) for proper indepth study for documenting statistically of the status of women in various spheres of fisheries) & multi-dimensional issues, which is still lacking. It should bring out meso- and micro-level analytical studies on how employment in the fisheries/aquaculture sector is gendered and embedded in wider social, cultural, economic, political and ecological structures and processes
i) To develop women oriented technologies as well as techno-preneurship models to equip women economically.

Though other issues like social discrimination, lack of access to asset and lack of decision making power are prevailing in the field, they can be addressed only through concentrated efforts by different agencies as the change is to happen in the social system. As the problems due to belief systems and customs restricting women cannot be addressed through fisheries related development initiatives, we need to focus on the technological, financial as well as policy support to enable women for achieving an economic empowerment, which will help them to overcome the other bottle necks through a gradual process.

Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance ...

Kofi Annan

References


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