

Enablers, drivers and barriers

This article reviews a recent publication on women's participation and leadership in fisherfolk organisations and collective action in fisheries

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For all those who have been working with women in fisheries, this review of literature, undertaken by Enrique Alonso-Población and Susana V. Siar for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), is indeed a fine overview of what is written and documented about women in fisheries.

Further, through an insightful logical framework, various aspects of the changes that have taken place and the actual evolution of women's collective action and their participation in leadership in fishworkers' organisations has been sifted out and highlighted. This desk study was undertaken to understand the barriers and constraints women face when participating in fisher organisations as members and leaders; identify opportunities where women have

successfully participated in organisations and how such examples could be scaled up in other situations where constraints are high; and identify good practices that promote and strengthen women's participation in a meaningful and effective way.

The document first sets the scene regarding women in fisheries—their extensive work yet limited participation. It then moves on to enablers and entities that play a role in fostering women's collective action and participation in organisations, followed by the drivers for organising and the barriers to women's participation in organisations. Following a lucid conclusion, the authors also make a series of useful recommendations to the various stakeholder groups.

Towards this end, the authors have used an interesting methodology to select documents that were studied, classifying papers using the Mendeley desktop tool, and further classifying papers in four categories.

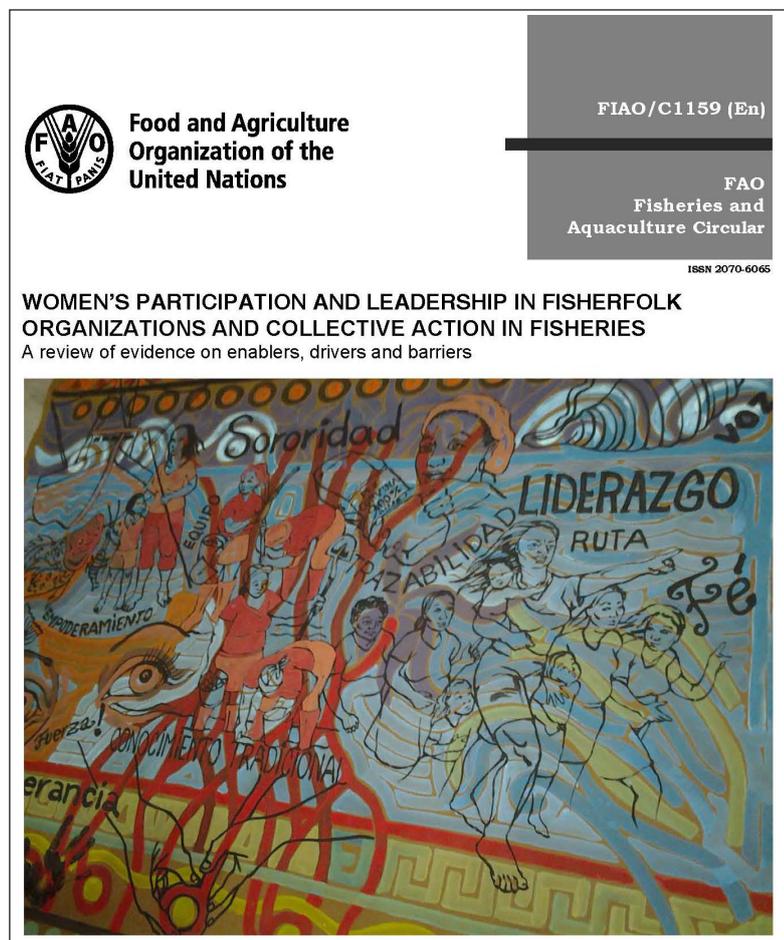
Papers categorised as Level 1 focused on the roles of women in fisherfolk organisations, specifically analysing participation and leadership, and studying the various factors, such as historical, economic, and policy-related, responsible for the current status.

Level 2 comprised papers in which the roles of women in fisherfolk organisations were not the main focus but which provided insights on the roles of women in organisations and collective action as well as on the reasons responsible for the current status.

Level 3 papers focused on gender in fisheries and aquaculture, containing theoretical discussions of interest for the present work, or for their ethnographic or theoretical contributions to the topic of gender and fisheries.

Papers categorised as Level 4 were those that analysed the current status and argued that improved management and livelihood outcomes would be achieved through enhanced participation of women in fisherfolk organisations, or gave explanations for their lack of participation.

The authors highlight that an increased recognition of the multiplicity of roles played by women in, and their crucial contributions to, the fisheries sector exists in stark contrast with the low presence of women in fisherfolk



organisations around the globe, and their lack of access to decisionmaking positions in many formal fisheries related organisations.

Various actors like state institutions, social movements and civil society organisations, development and conservation projects, religious movements, academia, endogenous mobilisation, the presence of charismatic individuals and the occurrence of coincidences have been identified as the key enablers of women's participation in collective action. Dwindling resources and the need to secure management roles, modernisation, the allocation of fishing rights, economic changes, family welfare and women's rights are identified by various authors as the main drivers or catalysts of women's engagement in collective action.

In all these sections, the authors have selected interesting evidence-based case studies to back up the points being made. This selection of case studies are learning tools for social interveners, community organisers and leaders of gender-sensitive development programmes although it is important that the particular historical or political context in which the change took place be kept in mind. No generalisations have been made, which also indicates that methodology from one context cannot be automatically extrapolated to other different contexts. The documentation also points out certain unconventional players or barriers in change processes, highlighting the role of certain individuals or religious institutions and focussing on diversity.

The authors also finally make a set of recommendations addressed to the various players in the process which are also very insightful and realistic. They begin with suggestions to all stakeholders, then to fisherwomen, researchers, academia and research institutions, the states, social movements and CSOs, NGOs and UN agencies, all extremely pertinent and clear. These recommendations indicate the need for collective and collaborative strategies that should be kept in mind if fisheries and women in fisheries have to be sustained. These recommendations also draw attention to the lacunae in existing research which are important pointers for future work and action.

Personally, I commend the authors for work meticulously undertaken and the FAO for commanding such a study. I think this is important documentation that captures in a meaningful nutshell the work among women in fisheries of the past 50 years, making the experience available to young activists,

researchers and communities themselves who can further intervene and take the role of women in fisheries ahead. I feel truly fortunate to have been active in this process of working with the women in the sector, learning all along, and meeting and interacting with powerful and committed women who have been a part of these processes and writings.

However, I would disagree with the authors concluding that the literature on women in fisheries is limited. I personally am amazed to see the growth of writing and documentation on the subject from very perceptive angles from the time I commenced work in the communities in the early 1970s. These documents add to the nuanced and insightful understanding of the manner in which patriarchy works in providing spaces for women's agency or in dividing and inhibiting them.

As a reflective postscript, I must add that this review has not included a lot of material published by women in journals like ICSF's *Samudra Report* and *Yemaya*. Material not available online also seems to have been excluded. Further, important issues which carry significant implications for women's organising have not been taken into account.

An example is the backlash that greets women when they begin to raise their voice, as witnessed in India and South Africa where the predominantly male leadership of fishworker organisations used identity politics to oust women organisers who raised important but uncomfortable questions, on the grounds that they were not from the fishing community per se.

That it takes a significant amount of time for women to actually outgrow the patriarchal socialisation and become visible in leadership is a reality and that the space for a different kind of collective leadership has not yet been created in society at large. This has also impacted on the growth of women in leadership in organisations. Worse, anti-women politics seem to be overtaking fishing societies as unpublished research in India undertaken by some of us indicates, revealing a fall in the female sex ratio with the capitalisation of the fishery, indicative of growing sex pre-selection in favour of male offspring in coastal communities in India.

This is just to say there is a lot more out there which is not easily accessible, on the experience of women in fisheries, and which should form part of any serious and comprehensive review on the subject. ❏

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