



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



©Mike Lusmore/Duckrabbit

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AQUACULTURE IN BANGLADESH AND INDONESIA: INSIGHTS FROM FOUR CASE STUDIES

## WOMEN AND AQUACULTURE: MORE KNOWLEDGE NEEDED

Aquaculture is the fastest growing food-producing sector in the world.<sup>i</sup> It plays a key role in food and nutrition security, as well as in the livelihoods of millions of people. As such, it also holds significant potential in contributing to women's empowerment.

While women are strongly present in post-harvest nodes of value chains (such as processing) in developing

countries, studies suggest that women tend to be relegated to lower value opportunities.<sup>iii</sup> Yet in-depth understanding of the way in which women are involved in, and benefit or bear costs from, aquaculture – as well as factors shaping these – has been lacking. These insights are needed to equip aquaculture policies, programmes and projects to better engage, benefit and empower women.

**“EMPOWERMENT:  
THE EXPANSION OF  
PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO  
MAKE STRATEGIC LIFE  
CHOICES IN A CONTEXT  
WHERE THIS ABILITY  
WAS PREVIOUSLY  
DENIED TO THEM”<sup>ii</sup>**

### BACKGROUND: WOMEN IN AQUACULTURE IN BANGLADESH AND INDONESIA

- Globally, Indonesia ranks third and Bangladesh fifth in terms of percentage of world aquaculture production.<sup>iv</sup>
- Women engage in a range of aquaculture production and value chain activities in both countries.
- In aquaculture value chains, women tend to be concentrated in lower value roles.<sup>v</sup>
- In Bangladesh, women access about 1.4 million out of an estimated 17.80 million jobs in the aquaculture and fisheries sector.<sup>vi</sup>
- Women are heavily involved in the shrimp processing industry in Bangladesh – representing an estimated 88 percent of over 1 million factory workers, but only up to 1 percent of shrimp pond owners/farmers.<sup>vii</sup>
- In Indonesia, women predominate in fish processing and marketing, with their involvement estimated as 1.5 to 1.7 times higher than men, respectively.<sup>viii</sup>
- There is a lack of in-depth information from both countries regarding women's roles and outcomes for women, as well as the factors that enable or constrain these outcomes.



©WorldFish

In response to this need for a greater understanding of women's empowerment in and through aquaculture, the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and WorldFish have undertaken a study entitled *Women's Economic Empowerment in Aquaculture Production Systems in Asia:*

*Comparative Case Studies and Synthesis from Bangladesh and Indonesia.* This small study provides qualitative insights into women's social and economic empowerment in aquaculture and how this can be better fostered through policy and development interventions.

## WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT AND FACTORS SHAPING ENGAGEMENT

The cases highlighted that women in Bangladesh and Indonesia are significantly involved in fish and shrimp aquaculture, though their involvement varies in forms and degrees. Women's opportunities in aquaculture are strongly shaped by their socio-economic status, with a clear divide between poor women and those from medium and high wealth groups. Women from low-income households lack the combination of assets necessary to access higher return opportunities.

Moreover, the kinds of aquaculture roles in which women are engaged clearly reflect social and gender norms in both contexts. Specifically, the division of labour and opportunities are shaped by, and reflect notions of, socially acceptable 'women's work' versus 'men's work'. This means that women in the case areas tend to be involved in aquaculture roles that align with socially-designated views of women as responsible for domestic work.

Similarly, social constraints regarding appropriate spaces for 'women's work' frequently limit women to employment that can be carried out within the homestead. Factories receive some social acceptance as a 'bounded space' in which women engage primarily with other women and with high surveillance. Yet there are simultaneously some significant social constraints on women travelling to and working outside the homestead in more independent roles. Rare occurrences of women engaged as shrimp farm operators stood out as the only observed instances within the cases that stretched these gender norms.

In both contexts, access to resources and financing are required for involvement in higher value roles. This underscores that women's socio-economic status influences their opportunities – signaling that women with the greatest need to benefit from the sector face the greatest challenges.

**“WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN AQUACULTURE ARE STRONGLY SHAPED BY THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, WITH A CLEAR DIVIDE BETWEEN POOR WOMEN AND THOSE FROM MEDIUM AND HIGH WEALTH GROUPS”**

**“...THE KINDS OF AQUACULTURE ROLES IN WHICH WOMEN ARE ENGAGED CLEARLY REFLECT SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS IN BOTH CONTEXTS”**

## THE STUDY

**Study objective:** To generate a greater understanding of whether women's engagement in aquaculture contributes to social and economic empowerment, as well as the ways in which it would do so.

**Methodology:** Literature reviews and two empirical qualitative case studies in both Bangladesh and Indonesia (for a total of four cases). The empirical studies used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

**Case typology:** The cases were selected so that they would represent several different key aquaculture sectors, nodes and types:

- Sectors: shrimp and fish.
- Nodes: production and processing.
- Types: homestead and commercial.

### Cases and locations:

#### Bangladesh:

1. Homestead pond aquaculture production systems in Kutakhali village under Dacope Upazila, Laudobi Union and Khulna District.
2. Shrimp processing factories in Khulna City, in Khulna District and Division (Kulsum Galli, Natun Bazar Char, Khulna City on the urban side of the Rupsha River, Baghmara village, Rupsha Thana, and Khulna district on the peri-urban side).

#### Indonesia:

1. Household-scale shrimp farming in Lawallu Village, Barru District and South Sulawesi Province.
2. Homestead-based milkfish processing in Kalanganyar village, Sidoarjo District and East Java.

*When: January to December 2015*



# OUTCOMES FOR WOMEN AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

The cases support that engagement in aquaculture has a number of important positive and potential outcomes for women – as well as some limitations and negative outcomes.

## Positive outcomes

When women are involved in paid work in aquaculture, income is the primary benefit – and with it comes increases in women's purchasing power and financial freedom. Engagement in aquaculture also contributes to some aspects of involved women's social empowerment. In particular, it contributes to some women's expanding human and social capital in the form of self-identified increases in self-esteem, confidence, appreciation and respect from their husbands in relation to earning income.

## Negative outcomes and limitations to empowerment

Along with the positive outcomes identified in the cases, women's engagement in aquaculture was also found to bring some negative outcomes in some cases: increases in work burdens; a lack of sleep associated with long hours; and, challenges balancing paid work and domestic roles. For women working in shrimp factories, this was accompanied by physical suffering associated with the difficult conditions in the factories. When engagement stretches traditional gender norms and expectations, it may also bring social criticisms and harm to the reputation of the women (and their spouses).

Moreover, positive outcomes in the cases were bound by a critical limiting factor: women's agency to make strategic life and livelihood decisions

remain largely unchanged by their engagement. In the cases, women engaged in aquaculture continued to be dependent on family or spousal permission for their own actions and decisions – and thus they continued to be limited in their influence over aquaculture resources, and over efforts to innovate aquaculture practices in order to maximize production. Furthermore, empowerment effects are limited in scope, in the sense that women in the cases have continued to be predominantly engaged in low-return roles in aquaculture.

## Factors shaping outcomes

*Intra-household decision-making patterns and norms* regarding household headship and obedience emerged as significant. Predominant gender and socio-religious norms positioning men as the 'head of the household' and women as needing to obey their husbands – in combination with gender norms regarding roles, work and mobility – limit women's ability to engage and benefit fully from various aquaculture and capacity development opportunities. Similarly, it is important to note that the double burden incurred by women is a direct function of the absence of gender role re-distribution in households, as women take on paid work or additional aquaculture activities.

*Financial assets* are factors in the success of women. They are necessary to make the enterprise investments required for success, such as financing recovery from crop failure, and funding system intensification and market promotion. As such, the cases highlighted that gender, as a factor

in engagement, is crosscut by socio-economic status (class).

*Human and social capital* are also key factors shaping outcomes for women in aquaculture. Training and formal education are important, not only in terms of direct exposure to new knowledge and opportunities to build transferable skills (such as communication), but also in terms of developing social networks and partnerships. While more research is needed, social capital – in the form of association membership, private partnership and informal networks – appears to be important to women business owners or operators in terms of learning, innovation, investment or marketing. Opportunities for women to enhance human and social capital appear to be interconnected with class and financial assets, with poor women having the least opportunities.

*Husband and family member support* was also identified as an important factor cross-cutting each of the previous factors in contributing to – or limiting – women's success in the cases. Identified aspects of spousal support enabling success included providing financial support, business advice and (in the shrimp case) emotional support, when dealing with community-based social criticism of stretching gender boundaries. While this would need further investigation, the one embedded example of the woman operator who most successfully challenged gender norms suggests that extended family support and encouragement can contribute to women aspiring to take on roles that stretch constraining gender norms.



©Foto Agencies



©WorldFish



## BOX 1. MOVING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENABLING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AQUACULTURE

As a vital and growing sector, aquaculture has notable potential to contribute to women's economic and social empowerment. These substantive empowerment outcomes are not automatically generated, however. Rather, they require specific strategies and investments. Key recommendations for policy, research and development actors from this scoping study are for policy and development agencies to support and invest in:

- Policy and policy implementation mechanisms that enable gender-equal access and control to resources and assets. In particular, access to land and pond ownership through inheritance and access to financing and collateral.
- Gender equality and awareness-raising programmes, including those that benefit the families of women and that help to share domestic and family care work between women and men.
- Identification of the most promising, higher-value entrepreneurial and employment entry points that are attractive to women in aquaculture value chains, along with the means to overcome barriers to these – including investing in gender-equitable work environments with viable pathways for women in leadership roles.
- Training and support programmes more explicitly targeting women, focusing on higher-return opportunities and designed specifically for poor women.
- Involvement of men and other household members, together with women, in aquaculture training. Specifically in awareness-building around expanding the decision-making power of women in aquaculture and by promoting and recognizing positive deviance in terms of gender role models.
- Identifying, developing and promoting programme strategies to reduce time burdens and other negative outcomes for women in the sector.
- Interventions, support and capacity development initiatives that take a multi-faceted approach. For example, initiatives addressing multiple, interconnected factors important to women's empowerment in aquaculture, such as technical skills, access to assets (such as production equipment) and network development (expanding professional and market/client connections).
- Aquaculture interventions engaging with underlying normative barriers, including by specifically incorporating gender transformative strategies in trainings and extension activities.

<sup>i</sup> FAO. 2009. Global aquaculture and its role in sustainable development by Subasinghe, R., Soto, D., & Jia, J.. Rome. Reviews in Aquaculture, 1(1), 2-9.

<sup>ii</sup> Kabeer, N. 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3): 435-464.

<sup>iii</sup> Coles, C., Mitchell, J. 2011. Gender and agricultural value chains: a review of current knowledge and practice and their policy implications. ESA Working Paper No. 11-05. Rome: Agricultural Development Economics Division (ESA), FAO.

<sup>iv</sup> FAO. 2016. *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture: Opportunities and Challenges*. Rome. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

<sup>v</sup> Coles, C., Mitchell, J. 2011. Gender and agricultural value chains: a review of current knowledge and practice and their policy implications. ESA Working Paper No. 11-05. Rome: Agricultural Development Economics Division (ESA), FAO.

<sup>vi</sup> APCAS (Asia and Pacific Commission on Aquacultural Statistics). 2016. Fisheries statistics in Bangladesh: Issues, challenges, plans. Bangladesh Department of Fisheries and FAO (available at [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/ess/documents/apcas26/presentations/APCAS-16-6.3.2\\_-\\_Bangladesh\\_-\\_Fisheries\\_Statistics\\_in\\_Bangladesh.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/ess/documents/apcas26/presentations/APCAS-16-6.3.2_-_Bangladesh_-_Fisheries_Statistics_in_Bangladesh.pdf))

<sup>vii</sup> SAFE (Social Activities For Environment). 2013. *The master's will is the law: Working conditions of the contract workers in the shrimp and fish processing sector of Bangladesh*. SAFE Policy Brief No. 2.

<sup>viii</sup> MMAF (Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries). 2015. *Tenaga kerja pengolahan dan pemasaran menurut provinsi dan jenis kelamin, tahun 2011-2013*.

### CONTACTS

FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific  
Clara Mi Young Park - Clara.Park@fao.org  
Gender Rural and Social Development Officer



RESEARCH  
PROGRAM ON  
Fish

