

# EMPOWERING WOMEN IN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

By Joe Zelasney, Jariya Sornkliang, Lena Westlund, and Alyssa Thomas

*Gender equity and equality are fundamental guiding principles in FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), ideals which are also closely aligned with the overarching objectives and approach in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Women comprise almost half of the workforce in small-scale fisheries; however, their contribution to food security, income generation and community resilience is under-valued. To redress this deficit, gender perspectives need to be mainstreamed into fisheries and aquaculture programmes and policies at the local, national, and international level.*



Credit: Margaret Fox/WCS

*Women in Dama District, Bua Province, Fiji, head out to catch mud crab at low tide.*

Small-scale fisheries (SSFs) encompass all activities along the value chain in both marine and inland waters, play an important role in food security and nutrition, and offer development pathways for poverty eradication and equitable development (FAO 2015). According to estimations, SSFs contribute about half of fish catches in developing countries and employ more than 90 percent of the approximately 120 million people employed in fisheries. An estimated 97 percent of these fishworkers live in developing countries, and almost half of these workers are women<sup>1</sup>.

Women play an important role along the entire fisheries value-chain, contributing to pre-harvest activities such as

making and mending nets, as well as catching, harvesting, and gleaning fish, invertebrates, and seaweeds. Women in small-scale fisheries also play a dominant role in processing and marketing fish, referred to as post-harvest activities. Women's work in fisheries contributes to food security and poverty alleviation, often in a direct way at the household level and with regard to the well-being of children<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of playing a critical role in fisheries and aquaculture value-chains, women's work is often informal, unrecognised, and undervalued. In many instances, women do not have a say in decisions that affect their livelihoods, have limited access to finance, to technology that could make their work more

efficient, and to services such as finance and education. As a result, they may have little choice but to accept unfavourable contracts, or unfair conditions and practices in fish sales and markets.

## Gender equality and women's empowerment

When women have opportunities to earn and control income, their spending is more likely to benefit the household's nutrition, health and education – all of which promote economic growth in the long term.

Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. Gender equality means women and men, girls and boys, have equal access to resources and opportunities, including economic participation and decision-making.

Women's empowerment is the process of enhancing women's ability to determine their own choices, and their right and ability to organise, influence, and participate in change through decision-making for themselves and others. This may be done through training and education, and facilitating access to usable assets, technology, finance, and services<sup>3</sup>.

Progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment are thus critical levers for achieving development outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, in terms of food and nutrition security, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability:

- Women gaining equal access to inputs, technology, financial services, education and markets in rural areas could lead to increases in agricultural production that could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 100–150 million<sup>5</sup>.
- Women's involvement in small-scale aquaculture production has been observed to help increase productivity and offers opportunities to increase fish consumption within the household through women's increased access to nutrient-rich fish<sup>6</sup>.
- Women have been documented to focus their spending on food, education and other family well-being investments, whereas men tend to focus more on their personal spending. Enhancements to women's control over production and income can thus be potent levers to strengthen food security and family well-being<sup>7</sup>.
- Reducing gender gaps in entrepreneurship and employment in fish value chains equates to greater

income for women and their families. This dovetails with findings that 'gender equality is a key contributor to growing and strengthening national, regional and global economies'<sup>8</sup>.

- Equitable engagement of women and men in natural resource governance has been shown to enhance environmental outcomes<sup>9</sup>.

## Small-scale fisheries in the Asia-Pacific region

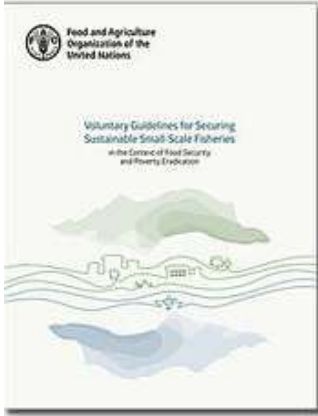
Small-scale fisheries are an important source of food and income and an integral element of cultural identity for nations across the Asia-Pacific region. It is estimated that about three-quarters of the world's small-scale fishers and fish workers live in Asia. In Asia small-scale fisheries are prevalent along the coasts, but also provide critical livelihoods opportunities in inland environments such as rivers, lakes and even alongside and within agricultural landscapes. Small-scale fisheries in Asia are typically characterised by open access, low levels of empowerment and a general lack of organisational structures and formal representation in decision-making processes. They also typically involve complex livelihood strategies combining fishing and other activities.

In addition to the productive activities of women in SSFs in Asia, they also perform reproductive work such as caring for children, food preparation, collecting water and fuel wood, and caring of sick persons. A study has found that in the same fishing community, women work longer hours than men<sup>9</sup>.

In the Pacific, small-scale fisheries, also referred to as 'coastal fisheries' play an indispensable role in the fight against a "triple burden of malnutrition" – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency and obesity. However, this role is being undermined because fishery resources are often in decline and ineffectively managed. Fish has traditionally formed a cornerstone of a healthy and balanced diet in the region - its importance is reflected in the consumption patterns of the people who, on average, consume two to four times the global per capita average of fish per year<sup>10</sup>.

Coastal fisheries in the Pacific region are the major source of fish consumed domestically and women play an essential role in the sector that is a primary contributor to nutrition, food security, culture, employment and recreation<sup>11</sup>. In Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanatu alone, women reportedly provide around 80 percent of the seafood catch for their communities' annual subsistence needs<sup>12</sup>.

## The SSF Guidelines



The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) are the first internationally negotiated instrument dedicated specifically to the small-scale fisheries sector. The Guidelines represent a global consensus on principles and guidance for small-scale fisheries governance and development (FAO, 2015).

The SSF Guidelines' mandate is to enhance the contribution of small-scale fisheries to global food security and nutrition, to contribute to the equitable development of small-scale fishing communities, and to achieve sustainable utilisation

of fisheries resources. These objectives are to be achieved through the promotion of a human-rights based approach including by (i) empowering SSF communities to participate in decision-making processes; and (ii) assuming responsibilities for sustainable use of fishery resources, with an emphasis on the needs of developing countries.

Notably, gender equity and equality are upheld as fundamental guiding principles in the SSF Guidelines, and they also include specific provisions for achieving gender equality. This represents an opportunity for governments to advance women's empowerment and to meet important goals related to social and economic equity and equality, environmental sustainability, and local food security, including relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, provides a shared



blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. It provides a holistic framework, with the vision of eradicating poverty and deprivation, growing economies, protecting the environment, advancing peace and promoting good governance. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which in themselves are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership.

There is an evident connection between the challenges faced by SSF communities and the objectives of the SDGs, and perhaps none is more pressing or have a more positive impact on sustainable development than SDG 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.

Hence, the objectives of the SSF Guidelines, and the manner in which they are to be achieved, are closely aligned with the overarching objectives and approach in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and are an important tool for achieving the 2030 agenda in SSF communities.

Both the SSF Guidelines and the 2030 Agenda are contributing to growing recognition of women's roles in small-scale fisheries and the need to achieve gender equality in fisheries. What follows are a series of brief examples of some of the work that is being undertaken within the above policy framework by different organisations concerned with fisheries to empower women and achieve gender equality.

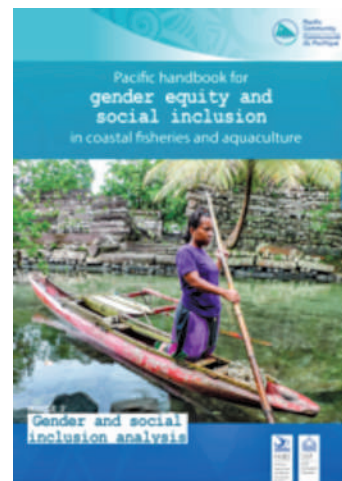
## Tools to support gender equality in the region

In order for gender perspectives to be widely mainstreamed into fisheries and aquaculture programmes/projects at the regional, national, and local levels, it is necessary for appropriate methods and tools to be developed to support small-scale fisheries and aquaculture sectors.

### ***Pacific Handbook for Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture***

The Pacific handbook for gender equity and social inclusion in coastal fisheries and aquaculture is a tailored guide to assist fisheries practitioners and managers to integrate gender and social inclusion into their daily work cycles. In addition, the

handbook provides basic tools for gender and social inclusion analysis as well as additional tools for policy formation, project design, planning and implementation.



The handbook is designed to give practical guidance on improving gender and social inclusion in coastal fisheries and aquaculture for staff working in fisheries agencies in Pacific Island countries and territories. It focuses on the responsibilities of Pacific Island governments to help promote sustainable development outcomes for all people relying on coastal fisheries and aquaculture for their food security and livelihoods.

The Second Edition, launched on International Women's Day this year has eight modules: Introduction, Gender and Social Analysis, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Government Process, Policy Cycle, Community Engagement, Coastal Fisheries Management, and Livelihoods.

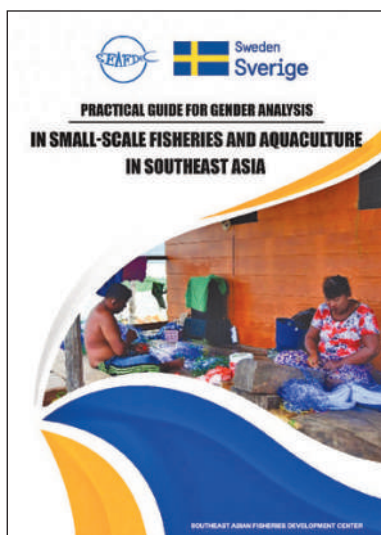
The modules are structured around the tasks involved in government work on coastal fisheries and aquaculture, that is, the planning and implementation of projects and programmes, including social analysis, monitoring and evaluation, policy development, community engagement, fisheries management, and livelihood projects.

Illustrative case studies, practical tips, checklists, and links to overarching international and regional commitments are integral part of the handbook to enable gender and social inclusion mainstreaming in coastal fisheries and aquaculture.

### ***Practical Guide for Gender Analysis in Small-scale Fisheries and Aquaculture in Southeast Asia***

A "Practical Guide for Gender Analysis in Small-scale Fisheries and Aquaculture in Southeast Asia" (henceforth the "Practical

Guide”) was developed to support the implementation of the SEAFDEC Gender Strategy (SEAFDEC, 2019). Through the promotion of the SEAFDEC Gender Strategy, SEAFDEC strives to mainstream and integrate gender perspectives into the SEAFDEC organisation, and in its programmes, projects, and activities to ensure that women and men access equitable benefits in the sustainable development and management of fisheries and aquaculture. Moreover, the Practical Guide also aims to apply the principles and recommendations of the SSF Guidelines, wherein readers will find its basic concepts in applying human rights-based and gender-equitable approaches in the whole value chain of the small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Southeast Asia.



With a view of obtaining successful gender mainstreaming in programmes and projects concerning small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in the Southeast Asian region, this Practical Guide aims to facilitate the conduct of gender analysis. It is intended to be used by programme/project managers, researchers, and fishery officers of the ASEAN Member States (AMSs) and fisheries-related organisations including SEAFDEC. It could also be used to assist the countries that still do not have a framework on gender in place, in conducting gender analysis to support in the development, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of programmes/projects that are gender-sensitive and gender-responsive, as appropriate.

The development of the “Practical Guide for Gender Analysis in Small-scale Fisheries and Aquaculture in Southeast Asia” actively involved Gender Focal Points from the AMSs, SEAFDEC Gender Focal Persons, gender experts, and partner organisations during a series of expert consultation workshops.

## SEAFDEC

Applying the SEAFDEC Practical Guide in a study on “Gender Dimension in the Value Chain of Small-scale Marine Aquaculture in Surat Thani Province in Thailand”, gender patterns are explored to understand the roles that women and men play in decision-making and the structural challenges that prevent equitable opportunities for men and women in small-scale marine aquaculture, Surat Thani province, Thailand.



*Women fish trader in Southeast Asia*

A questionnaire was used to interview aquaculture farmers in the seven districts of Surat Thani province, namely: Muang, Kanchanadit, Donsak, Thachana, Chaiya, Thachang, and Punpin. The total number of respondents was 93 persons comprising 64 men and 29 women.

With regard to gender, men worked on the aquaculture operations through to selling, as well as other tasks requiring labour such as house repairs. Women were also involved in some of the aquaculture tasks such as preparing the ponds, harvesting, selling, and accounting; as well as doing housework like cooking, taking care of children and the elderly, and backyard gardening. However, the survey found that women had a chance to attend community activities the same as men. Also, although the men took on the leading roles in aquaculture and women worked mainly in the household, they helped together in both household duties and aquaculture. Furthermore, the results from the survey found that men and women engage in decision-making together for the important activities.

Overall, the analysis revealed that the gender differentiated roles are based on a strong stereotype of gender division

of labour, i.e. that men must work on hard and heavy tasks while women's work is in households. The study suggests that because of the household duties, women have a heavier workload than men, and so it would help if there was a better understanding of the gender roles so that attitudes may improve with regard to assisting each other.

### **Wildlife Conservation Society**

A Pacific Community report from 2018 noted that despite substantial research on women fishers, some knowledge gaps still remain on women's roles in both subsistence and commercial fisheries.

In response to these knowledge gaps, scientists from the Wildlife Conservation Society, Conservation International, Vatuvara Foundation, University of the South Pacific, and University of the Sunshine Coast, surveyed fisheries-dependent communities across Fiji with the aim of better understanding and quantifying the evolving role of Indigenous (*iTaukei*) women fishers in the SSF sector, which includes both freshwater and marine fisheries.



Credit: WCS

The study, "Why they must be counted: Significant contributions of Fijian women fishers to food security and livelihoods," reinforced several traditional views, such as *iTaukei* women preferentially fishing closer to their villages, but challenged other assumptions – for example, women fished a wider range of habitats (from inland rivers to the open ocean) and species than previously described.

Interestingly, an increasing number of women used a boat and fished with men. In addition to gleaning for invertebrates and seaweed, women also caught over a hundred species of fish. Women stated they fished primarily to feed their families, emphasising their significant contribution to household food security. Although almost half of the women sold part of their catch to supplement household incomes, they also engaged in other income earning livelihoods, and therefore were not solely dependent on fisheries. The authors raised concerns that women fishers targeted a number of fish species in nursery areas that were in sharp decline in Fiji. The study concluded that given the level of engagement in, and contributions to fisheries, the inclusion of *iTaukei* women fishers in fisheries planning and management is critical for ensuring the sustainability of small-scale fisheries in Fiji.

### **WorldFish**

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as smartphones hold enormous potential for transformative gain and are instrumental in scaling women's employment model in fishing communities. They increasingly allow us to automate and augment the collection, collation, communication and analysis of more and better data to inform targeted interventions. Yet the pace of their development and uptake is at the same time often a deterrent for people to engage due to indecision and "too much information." Furthermore, there are significant risks of increasing gender inequalities and marginalising the poor due to digital divides, such as access to technology and digital literacy.



Bangladeshi woman using ICT to receive mobile payment

In fisher communities of coastal Bangladesh, fishing for hilsa shad (*Tenulosa ilisha*) is a key livelihood activity. Recent management measures have closed the fishery for three months a year, so women from these communities are engaged in various enterprise development and income generating activities to build their livelihood resilience

during hilsa fishing closures. In collaboration with a social business enterprise, one such activity is making hand-knitted/crocheted toys and clothes for export markets under the branded name Pebbles. ICTs play an important role in bridging the communication gap between the participating women living in remote areas and the social enterprise operating from the country's capital. Mobile video technology has allowed women to access new designs and attain better prices. The project also taps into an existing mobile banking service called bKash, which works to financially include the unbanked people of Bangladesh. With the help of mobile phone banking technology, these women have gained financial inclusion and control of their money.

## Summary and conclusion

There is a need for more accurate, visible and accessible information on women in the fisheries sector. Their unique perspectives are not routinely incorporated into fisheries management and policy decisions, which is needed to ensure sustainable and equitable small-scale fisheries.

In order for gender perspectives to be widely mainstreamed into fisheries and aquaculture programmes/projects at the regional, national, and local levels, it is necessary for

appropriate methods and tools to be developed and applied to support the conduct of gender analysis specifically for the small-scale fisheries and aquaculture sectors.

Furthermore, fisheries managers and practitioners need to build strategic partnerships with gender and development organisations in the region, which have decades of experience in gender inclusion and can help fisheries to raise their gender equality benchmark.

There are a number of organisations that fisheries managers and practitioners could call on, including regional bodies such as the Pacific Community (SPC), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, Pacific Islands Development Forum, the University of the South Pacific; the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, international and local as well as international aid organisations, UN agencies like the FAO, and international organisations such as WorldFish.

The support they provide could include sharing practical steps or best practices to promote gender inclusion, such as having a male and a female facilitator when going into the field; or breaking into groups so women can talk more freely, but then also creating a space to bring women and men together and where they can share each other's ideas. 🗣️



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF  
**ARTISANAL FISHERIES  
AND AQUACULTURE**  
2022



The United Nations General Assembly declared 2022 the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022) in recognition of the millions of small-scale fishers, fish farmers and fish workers who provide healthy and nutritious food to billions of people and contribute to achieving Zero Hunger.

The objective of celebrating IYAFA 2022 is twofold: The Year aims to focus world attention on the role that small-scale

fishers, fish farmers and fish workers play in food security and nutrition, poverty eradication and sustainable natural resource use – thereby increasing global understanding and action to support them.

FAO is the lead agency for celebrating the year in collaboration with other relevant organisations and bodies of the United Nations system. For further details: <http://www.fao.org/artisanal-fisheries-aquaculture-2022/en/>

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**Ms Lena Westlund** ([Lena.Westlund@fao.org](mailto:Lena.Westlund@fao.org)) has extensive experience in fisheries and development cooperation. She has lived and worked in Africa and Asia where she supported projects to alleviate poverty and promote food security in small-scale fishing and fish farming communities. At the global level, she has been involved with policy and has contributed to several FAO publications, e.g., on the ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF) and on marine protected areas (MPAs) and fisheries. She was engaged in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) development process and now supports their implementation. Ms Westlund currently lives in Stockholm, Sweden, from where she continues to work as an FAO consultant.



**Ms Alyssa Thomas** ([noextinction@yahoo.com](mailto:noextinction@yahoo.com)) received her PhD in environmental studies from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She worked for Ya'axche Conservation Trust to help develop a compliance strategy for four protected areas in Southern Belize. Her work with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Fiji, focuses on the socio-economic impacts of Tropical Cyclone Winston and the role of Fijian women in inshore fisheries. Additionally, Ms Thomas serves as a consultant for MarAlliance, assisting with research on fisher attitudes towards sharks and the consumption of cecina (dried shark meat). Her interests also include the drivers of compliance behaviour.