

WOMEN AS WORKERS IN FISHERY ACTIVITIES

by

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This paper attempts to present the situation of conflict between the reality of women's role in the fishery sector and the reporting on fisherwomen by official sources.

There are many papers reporting that women play a major role in the fishery communities, but most of them are said to be powerless and vulnerable. It is the men who hold most of the leadership positions in both the social and economic spheres. This situation is true in some other Asian countries. For Thailand, based on our observations during research work, women in fishing community are accepted in many leadership roles concerning the household economy and decision making. They can manage and make financial decision not only within their household but also in the community marketing system. We found that many successful *Pae Pla* (fish wholesalers) were women and we saw that many fish processing enterprise owners were women. Many offshore fishery activities are effectively managed by women.

1. Statistics on Women

The Thailand marine fishery statistical survey of 1995 gave the total number of fishing households in the country (24 coastal provinces) as 80,701. Among those, 50,357 (62.4%) engaged exclusively in marine capture fishery; 27,357 (33.9%) engaged exclusively in aquaculture and 2,987 (3.7%) engaged in both activities. The average household size being 5.3 persons, we can estimate that the fishing population in 1995 was 427,715. The statistics of 8 of the 24 coastal provinces show that the distribution of fishery household members between male and female are 51.3% and 48.7% respectively (Table 1). This proportion conforms to that of the last 10 year survey (1985).

Table 1. Number of fishery household members by sex (both fishing and employee households)

Provinces	1985		1995	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Trat	10,026 (51.2)	9,556 (48.8)	11,733 (52.6)	10,559 (47.4)
Rayong	6,648 (51.8)	6,193 (48.2)	5,744 (50.9)	5,542 (49.1)
Chon Buri	5,831 (52.4)	5,298 (47.6)	3,786 (51.3)	3,590 (48.7)
Samut Prakarn	7,998 (51.7)	7,467 (48.3)	6,860 (49.1)	7,119 (50.9)
Samut Sakhon	9,672 (52.4)	8,792 (47.6)	7,785 (49.9)	7,804 (50.1)
Petch Buri	9,939 (51.6)	9,322 (48.4)	7,287 (50.4)	7,161 (49.6)
Chumporn	10,289 (52.3)	9,371 (47.7)	12,108 (53.0)	10,739 (47.0)
Surat Thani	13,789 (51.9)	12,773 (48.1)	14,338 (51.3)	13,610 (48.7)
Total 8 Provinces	74,192 (51.9)	68,772 (48.1)	69,641(51.3)	66,124(48.7)

Source : The National Statistical Office, 1985, 1995

Regarding the statistics of the same survey which include only "fishermen" whose age is 13 years and more who were working at the sea when the survey was conducted, they revealed that only 16.2% of those who are working as fishermen are women (Table 2). This figure is almost the same as that of the last 10 year statistics.

Table 2. Number of fishermen in 1985 and 1995, of 8 provinces distributed by working status and gender

Provinces	1985 (11-60+ yrs)		1995 (13-60+ yrs)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Trat	5,329(89.4)	634 (10.6)	6,148(86.2)	981(13.8)
Rayong	3,560(89.7)	409(10.3)	2,802(89.1)	343(10.9)
Chon Buri	3,342(86.6)	518(13.4)	1,891(84.5)	346(15.5)
Samut Prakarn	4,085(73.2)	1,497(26.8)	2,986(77.9)	845(22.1)
Samut Sakhon	5,188(76.5)	1,589(23.5)	3,610(83.8)	696(16.2)
Petch Buri	5,342(81.8)	1,184(18.2)	3,511(83.0)	718(17.0)
Chumporn	5,316(87.1)	791(12.9)	6,531(86.6)	1,013(13.4)
Surat Thani	6,974(79.8)	1,762(20.1)	7,568(80.5)	1,837(19.5)
Total 8 Provinces	39,136(82.4)	8,384(17.6)	35,047(83.8)	6,779(16.2)

Source: The National Statistical Office, 1985, 1995

This is very important when we are thinking of a development project that proposes assistance to the fisherwomen. This data from the national statistical survey does not represent the real number of women involved in the fisheries sector.

2. Women as workers in offshore activities

This part of the paper tries to present the activities of women that we noted during a field research in the eastern part of the gulf of Thailand. U-Tapao Mai, a village in Rayong province, is a small fishing community. Its people migrated from the military area of U-Tapao Airport. The population consists of approximately 80-100 households. Most of the villagers are fishermen or are engaged in fishery related occupations (fish wholesaling, retailing and processing). Every household is involved in crab gill net fishing. Some of them have squid traps and fish seasonally for jellyfish and have cast nets for catching planktonic shrimp. The plot of land allocated to villagers by the government is just large enough for their houses and not enough for cultivation. Fishing is the only way of earning a living of these people. Household members are employed intensively. Women are responsible not only for the home and the family, but are also actively involved in many fishing activities.

When the men come back from the sea with 2-3 gill nets full of blue swimming crabs, the women are responsible for separating the dead crabs from the live ones in order to get a good price for the catch. The live crabs are tied with elastic and kept in big plastic buckets full of sea water.

Before noon, the crab wholesalers come to the village. Most of them are women. The prices of live crabs are settled through bargaining and depend on the quantity of crabs on that day. If the price is agreeable, the buyer will bring her scale to weigh the catch and calculate its value. Crab wholesalers come to the village in pick-up trucks with a big container with an oxygen tank in the back. Then the crabs are released into the container. These crabs will be sold directly to the restaurants in Rayong town.

Just 2-3 kilometers from U-Tapao Mai village is Ban Pala, a big community of approximately 300 households. Half of the population are fishermen, and the other half work in the factory or on their farms. Many fishing activities are practiced: fishing and fresh fish sales, making shrimp paste, making fish sauce and selling dried fish. All activities related to fishery are carried out by women. Because of the beautiful long beach and shoreline road, the provincial governor wants to preserve this area for tourism. Keeping the beach clean is a top priority whereas fishermen need the beach for their fishing activities. At the moment that I visited the village, there were a few groups of women along the shore cleaning planktonic shrimp under temporary shelters. This cleaning activity requires 2 or 3 hours and is a very important process in shrimp-paste making. The beach is used not only for planktonic shrimp cleaning but also for storing fishing gears. When the government plans to develop the beach for tourism purpose, all the fishing activities have to move to other beaches.

A young fishermen family, consisting of father, mother and 2 small children, earns their living by fishing and selling fresh fish in the local market. The young fisherman as the household head has to go to the sea to fishing from 4 o'clock every morning and comes back around 1 o'clock in the afternoon. His wife has to take care of the children, prepare food, clean the house, wash her family's clothes and wait for her husband to come back from the sea. Their house is near the beach. When the boat of her husband comes back, she has to help him carry their fish back home, select and classify the product for selling at the afternoon market. She takes her place in the market to sell their fish which takes around 2-3 hours. Her husband meanwhile takes care of the children, cooks their evening meal, and waits for his wife to come back from the market. Every day the sharing of activities between husband and wife are repeated in this pattern, except during the monsoon season (November and December), when they have nothing to do. The young fisherman said fish is now difficult to find and he can catch only small amount each time. However, he can survive in this job because the value of the fish is higher than the past.

There are at least three fish wholesalers who are popular among fishermen in Rayong. They are women of about 50-55 years' old. They not only purchase every kind of sea produce but also give loans by providing fishing gear to the small scale fishermen. Gill net sets for swimming crabs are usually provided by the three wholesalers. One fisherman needs at least 3-4 sets of that gill net at a time. One set can last for one month. Although the fishermen who received a loan do not have to sell their product to the money lender, in practice, they usually sell their catches to the money owner to avoid the problem of carrying crabs to the market and bargaining with the fish retailers in the market.

One of the wholesalers manages her business in the way to complete the cycle as follow :

1. She lends money to fishermen to buy their own equipments, or some time provides them with 2-3 crab gill net sets.
2. She herself acts as fish wholesaler.
3. She purchases any of fish products from the fishermen. The price of the products differs between her money loaners and non-loaners. She will give higher price to non-loaners. The fishermen who are indebted have to pay her money back in total amount without interest whenever they have money.
4. She is a regular crab supplier for retailers in the center market. . She creates jobs for women in the village by organizing housewives to shell boiled crab and sell only meat which can get higher price. can earn 100-150 Bath a day (4-6 US\$) from the job.

Then we would say that women are active in the post harvest activities. Since we found :

Women: collect fish → trade fish → process fish → sell processed products.

Women: money lended to fishermen → purchase fish products → sell fish products → organize groups of women to do fish processing → sell processed products.

Women: employees in selecting fish → employees in fish processing.

Women: fish processing → sell processed products.

Women: middlemen of fish products → sell fish products to retailers in the market.

Women: housewife of fishermen → fish trader

Women: and so on

3. Fact and Figure

From the National Statistical Office survey, it seems that women are not visible in the statistics of the fishermen survey. They were reported as consisting only of 16% of the total fishermen population, although we realize that women engaged in all the post harvest activities. So the question is, who are the fisherwomen mentioned in the National Statistics. Are the women that we found in the fishing village fishermen (fisherwomen) or are they treated only as housewife?

We learn from many studies that women play important roles in fishery. But all the studies do not represent the socio economic and cultural status of fisherwomen of the country as a whole. They were only case studies of several areas. In planning for fishery development by encouraging women to participate, there is a need to have more representative and in-depth studies on the social, cultural and economic status of women in the fishery sector. The planning needs to be based on a solid data base.

It seems that fisheries development project have not offered much to women. The projects often promote the men's activities. Even now, women are encouraged to be involved in many fishery activities that are already done by women. Then the development project that try to include women is only a fashionable project.

4. Obstacles and Recommendation

The real obstacles for women in fishery development is the high degree of illiteracy among women in fishing community. This is the constraint in involving women actively in the development process.

The government should realize and plan to involve women systematically from the early stage of project planning. Let women be in responsible positions and be sure that education and training is carried out in parallel with the project implementation .