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Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP)

Lessons learned notes

Gender mainstreaming in small-scale fisheries

Gender mainstreaming in small-scale fisheries

Women play hugely important roles in small-scale fishing communities yet all too often their contributions go unrecognized. As a result, few activities in this sector take the needs of women into account. The Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) funded by Spain and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has sought to consider gender issues in all aspects of its activities through gender mainstreaming. This paper highlights some of the lessons, risks and recommendations RFLP has learned through this process.

Government officers explore gender roles during training in Viet Nam

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Don't get lost in translation

Concepts such as 'gender' and 'mainstreaming' can be difficult to understand for government officials, project staff and communities alike. Efforts need to be made to increase basic understanding of what gender mainstreaming means in real life.

- Keep it simple and 'non academic'. Explain gender from a perspective of women's empowerment and non-discrimination: the involvement of women to reduce inequalities, to improve their participation in decision-making and to make visible their roles in fishing communities.
- Giving examples from everyday life will help people understand.
- Recognize that understanding of 'gender' can be very different across different cultures and societies.
- Make sure that project or government staff themselves have a sound understanding of the concepts before going out to work with communities.
- Avoid getting bogged down with unhelpful definitions. Long discussions on the difference between 'gender equity' and 'gender equality' are time consuming and can be confusing.



In the Philippines women play an important role in Fisheries Law Enforcement Teams which counter illegal fishing activities. These teams have been trained and supported by RFLP.

Think gender (from the start)

Learn to look at policies, project proposals, activities etc., through a gender lens. Assess whether gender issues have been considered and if not, try to ensure that they are.

- Identify if policies in the fisheries sector are gender blind, gender neutral or gender discriminatory. Can they be changed?
- Think gender during the planning/formulation phase of projects, proposals and activities. Don't let it become an afterthought.
- Avoid using terms such as 'fisherman' or 'middleman'. At times it may seem unnecessary or even silly to do so, but use of these terms reinforces the image of fisheries being a male only domain when usually this is incorrect.
- Make sure activity proposals (such as for training) clearly specify the involvement of women in terms of numbers and if possible, suitability.
- Think about who will be using what, when buying equipment, and do not assume tools and technology are gender neutral.

Study first, then decide

What do you really know about the role of women, their access to resources, participation in decision making, etc?

Gender analysis should take place at the start of projects, so that interventions can be planned responding to specific needs.

- Do not take situations for granted – project staff need to understand the local context before taking action.
- Avoid preconceptions when looking at how gender relations in specific communities work, or values that people give to gender roles. Things may be different to what you are used to. Take time to observe.
- If gender analysis cannot take place prior to a project, carry it out as soon as possible. It can help evaluate the design of any intervention and identify any necessary adjustments during early implementation.
- Beware of situations where communities or counterparts may say, 'gender isn't an issue here'. Whilst women may appear to be involved in many activities, considerable barriers to their full and effective participation may still exist.

Legislation and policies can be changed

With RFLP support and advocacy, the Sri Lankan government has revised the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act No. 2 of 1996 which did not allow women to be members of Fisheries Committees. This represents an unprecedented opportunity for women to become legal members of Fisheries Committees and to participate in fisheries planning and management.



Women take part in a planning exercise in Viet Nam to identify suitable livelihoods activities for community groups.

Consider quotas for women's participation

The use of quotas is a simple way to ensure that a minimum number of women participate in activities. However this approach also has its draw backs and ideally should only be considered as a last resort.

- Gender mainstreaming should be about more than numbers. Know your community and try to ensure that activities respond to the specific needs of men and women.
- The quota system may result in women participating in training and meetings which are not relevant to them.
- Setting aside seats specifically for women in decision-making bodies can be an effective way to guarantee representation, however, efforts need to be made to ensure active, and not token participation.

Making women's participation compulsory

In Sri Lanka, the inclusion of women representatives in co-management coordination committees established with RFLP support has been made compulsory. In addition, a minimum of two women directors must sit on the board of the RFLP-established Fish Finance Network Association. Meanwhile in the Philippines, RFLP is promoting the allocation of at least 30 percent of seats on Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Committees for women.



Monitoring marine resources in Indonesia. Women were actively encouraged to take part in training provided by RFLP in different monitoring methods.

It's never too late to carry out gender analysis

During 2011 RFLP carried out a gender analysis in the Negombo area of Sri Lanka. The aims were to understand gender differences in the division of labour at household and community level; to analyze the level of access to and control over resources and to identify levels of mobility. Adjustments were subsequently made to RFLP activities taking into account the results of the analysis.

Time and effort

Changing perceptions about gender roles is a long-term process that may take years, if not generations. Nevertheless, do not allow this to become a reason for inaction.

- For short-term projects it may be practical to focus on mid-level actors (e.g. government officers or NGOs) who can pass on skills, rather than on community members.
- A short one or two-day course can still be very useful to raise awareness of gender issues.
- Don't forget the men. Be proactive about getting men involved in training and focus on making them realize the important role they ought to play in building more equitable societies.

Getting the men involved

In Viet Nam, RFLP teamed up with the Women's Union to hold workshops to raise awareness of gender issues amongst members of fishing communities. The involvement of a large number of men (approximately 40%) helped dispel the impression that gender was 'women's business' and led to far more useful discussions on gender roles in the community.



In Timor-Leste RFLP has worked to enhance the role of traditional resource management by documenting local practices known as Tara Bandu. To signify their agreement, community leaders have signed the documents, with women adding their signatures for the first time too. This may not guarantee women will play any enhanced role in resource management, but it is an important symbolic step that can hopefully be built upon.

Be a gender focal point

Having gender focal points can help push forward the gender agenda particularly when it is not affordable to employ a full-time gender expert.

- Gender focal points do not need to be gender experts. However, he or she can be in charge of seeking professional expertise when needed, and supporting the implementation of any gender strategy.
- The gender focal points should be voluntary positions, however Terms of Reference for the post will help provide guidance for their roles.
- Sufficient time, resources, recognition and support should be provided by employers (e.g. ministries) so that the focal point can function effectively.
- Gender focal points do not need to all be women. Commitment and motivation are the key attributes.

Consider the participation of women in traditional 'male' activities

Consider the participation of women in traditional male activities and vice versa. Try to find the balance between being respectful to local culture, while also challenging traditional beliefs about women's and men's roles.

- Any change in perceptions (or even discussion) over what women's and men's roles should be is a positive step and should be encouraged.
- What can be done depends very much on specific context.
- Changes in roles should not only be directed to women, but also to men.
- Avoid being disrespectful to traditions, culture and religion.

Getting the women involved

In Sri Lanka, going out to sea to fish is almost exclusively the role of men. However, by involving women in RFLP's safety at sea training for fishers they learned about the importance of life jackets and other basic safety steps and encouraged their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons to follow them.



Vocational training provided by RFLP to members of fisher communities in Sri Lanka was highly popular with women. When asked what type of training they wanted, Fisheries Societies strongly preferred non-fisheries related areas such as dress making, beauty and IT with classes almost entirely made up of women.

Beware of double burden

Women already carry out a considerable range of activities in fishing communities. Care must be taken to ensure that any new initiative aimed at women does not create unrealistic demands on their time and resources.

- Gender analysis will help reveal what are women's responsibilities, daily routines, aspirations, etc. These can help with planning.
- Can the men help out more? The gender divide regarding certain activities within households or communities may be less than expected. RFLP experience has shown that when men are more aware of gender roles, they are more likely to share household and other activities with their wives.

Be flexible

Interventions need to be flexible and well planned so as to facilitate the participation and full involvement of women.

- Carry out a gender analysis to provide a clear idea of not only the needs of women, but also the practicalities of their involvement.
- Consider mobility – women need to be able to get to training or other activities.
- Think about time – activities need to be planned at a suitable time that does not clash with any other responsibilities inside or outside the household (mending nets, going to the market, feeding the family or animals etc.).
- Residential training that requires trainees to stay over-night may exclude women from joining.
- Consider group dynamics – age, social status and levels of education can all influence the active participation of women in training etc.

Make training convenient for women

In Indonesia, far fewer women attended an RFLP-supported seaweed training activity than were expected. Getting to the training location required some travel and an overnight stay and for many potential participants this was not possible. The project team learned from this experience, and on future occasions, ensured that training took place in local communities.



Community members in Cambodia learn to better manage their household finances and gain a better understanding of micro-finance products and services. Women played a major role in all RFLP micro-finance activities.

Gain the right support

Identify those in government, organizations, communities etc who will push forward the gender agenda. The higher these supporters are in the hierarchy of their organisations or communities the greater the possibility of success of pushing the agenda forward.

- Be proactive and approach those in government (or local authorities, etc.) who can support the gender agenda.
- Keep champions informed of progress and successes, not only problems!

Alternative fisheries livelihoods are very often women's livelihoods

Due to over-exploitation of resources, fishing communities often find themselves looking for other sources of income. Yet it is difficult for any fisher to totally give up fishing and embark on a new livelihood. Women are therefore often best placed to undertake any supplementary livelihoods activities.

- Women are generally willing to take on new livelihoods activities to support their families and their communities.
- Existing women's groups can be the ideal foundation for livelihoods actions.
- Income earned by women is more likely to help support family needs (food, education, health etc.).
- Beware of over-burdening an already hard working family member.
- Livelihoods support and training provided by government agencies, NGOs etc., needs to be more women-focused and women-friendly.

A focus on women

Of the livelihoods activities supported by RFLP approximately 41% were women focused, 49% mixed and just 10% were carried out by men only. Women's livelihoods activities included producing or improving a variety of fish/aquatic food products, small-scale agriculture such as chicken raising or coconut oil production, a fishing supply store, sewing and handicrafts as well as vocational skills such as beauty and IT. However, although certain livelihoods activities (e.g. handicrafts or sewing) were carried out by women's groups, husbands would often provide support when they had free time or when there was a large order to be fulfilled.



Members of women's groups in the Philippines take part in RFLP supported training to make improved shrimp paste.

Collect gender-disaggregated data

Capture the participation of men and women in project/programme activities through sex-disaggregated data.

- Take records of how many men and how many women participate in training etc., and attempt to assess the quality of their involvement in training.
- Advocate for more collaboration between departments or agencies responsible for statistics and fisheries to collect more gender-related data from the fisheries sector.
- Develop gender-specific monitoring and evaluation indicators.

Spread the good news

There can be no better encouragement for women to try something new or to have the confidence to speak out, than seeing the success or following good examples of others.

- Identify gender champions; those women who have been successful and are willing to share their experiences.
- Document the contribution of women or changes any activities have brought to their lives – video testimony can be particularly powerful!



RFLP's attempts to give Timorese women improved fish processing skills met with little success. However one of the trainees, Sabina Ximenes from Atauro Island, put her new skills to use and was soon running a highly successful business selling fish balls. Her experiences have been shared (in a video) with women from other areas to show that if Sabina can do it, then so can they.

Bio-gas benefits

The development of bio gas systems by RFLP are benefiting women, their households and the environment. In Viet Nam, bio gas systems have been introduced which run on pig waste. As a result, women no longer need to spend time and effort collecting wood for cooking fuel. This reduces pressure on forestry resources and environmental pollution from pig waste. Meanwhile in Indonesia, similar systems have helped reduce cooking costs by substituting the use of kerosene.

Increasing women's participation in resource management

Efforts took place in Cambodia to widen the participation of women in regular meetings to discuss fisheries management issues. Women have also been actively encouraged to join patrolling teams formed to conduct joint patrolling of Community Fisheries fishing areas with the fisheries authorities and the police.

In Indonesia RFLP made efforts to involve women in the process of co-management, including their participation in Marine Protected Area (MPA) management. A participatory process allowed women to express their opinions, often for the first time, at village meetings where management issues were discussed.

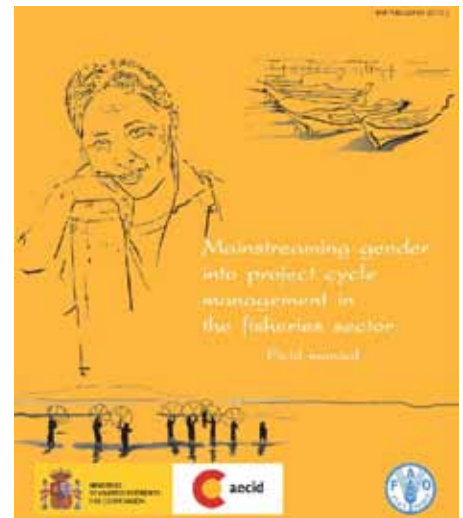
RFLP gender mainstreaming resources

As part of its efforts to promote gender equity to improve fisheries livelihoods RFLP developed a field handbook that gives guidance on taking gender into account in all phases of small-scale fisheries development projects.

The handbook provides:

- An overview of the rationale, concepts and approaches concerning mainstreaming gender equality in development cooperation;
- An overview of the role of women in the fisheries sector, the problems they face and possible empowerment opportunities;
- Tools for gender analysis in fisheries development projects and guidance on how to integrate gender aspects at various stages in the project cycle.

The handbook is available in English, Vietnamese and Thai languages.
at www.rflp.org/gender



More information on RFLP's gender strategy, activities and lessons learned can be found at <http://www.rflp.org/gender>

About RFLP

The Regional Fisheries Livelihood Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) sets out to strengthen capacity among participating small-scale fishing communities and their supporting institutions in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. By doing so the RFLP seeks to improve the livelihoods of fishers and their families, while fostering more sustainable fisheries resources management practices.



The four-year (2009 – 2013) RFLP is funded by the Kingdom of Spain and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) working in close collaboration with national authorities in participating countries.

For more information about the Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) see www.rflp.org