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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

What Does ‘Gender’ Mean in Myanmar’s Rural Fishery Communities?

Sayuri Ichikawa *

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of the world, fishing industry is perceived to be dominated by men. While its iconic figure, ‘fisherman’, is indeed usually a male,¹ and the term itself a telling indication of how the industry is gendered in the public eye, in this essay, I’m likely to complicate this picture, by discussing the important and unseen role of women in the processing and sale of marine products, which too often is unrecognized or underrepresented (Fröcklin 2013; Resurreccion 2008; Weeratunge et al., 2010).

In doing this, I take the readers to the field - the fisheries of Myanmar. The country is still struggling with internal conflict, and its many ethnic groups exhibit social norms that might fairly be glossed as patriarchal. In Myanmar, as in many other countries, the gendered division of labour and restrictions are observed in most aspects of domestic and public life, and this is more emphatically apparent in rural communities.² Myanmar’s fishing industry is

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¹ There are, of course, many exceptions to this. See, for example David Palazon’s documentary on female fisherfolk of Atauro Island in Timor-Leste (Palazon 2013), Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt’s documentary on women’s role in the fishery sector of Mumbai, India (Lahiri-Dutt 2019), and Charlotte Moser’s work “Listening to Women Fishers on the Sekong River” (Moser 2015).

² For a more detailed discussion on the status of women in present day Myanmar, see, *Raising the Curtain* from Gender Equality Network (GEN 2018).

no exception; women make a significant contribution to fish processing and marketing, yet their role is not fully acknowledged in the official statistics and is largely ignored by the policy-makers.

My research focused on the small-scale fishery value chain of fishing communities of Ayeyarwady region and was carried out as part of an internship for Network Activities Group.³ I carried out the research in early 2019 using qualitative methods for analysing the roles of multiple actors in Myanmar fisheries value-chain, their genders, their relationships and the opportunities and constraints they face, with the aim of identifying spaces for interventions that will better the lot of women working within the industry. My fieldwork revealed surprising and unexpected aspects of 'gender', and some even contradicted with the main-stream associations and perceptions of the term. In this note, I share these unexpected findings to illustrate the complexity and diversity of gender issues and challenges present in rural communities.

2. IS THE PHRASE 'WOMEN ARE CHATTY' COMMON ACROSS CULTURES?

A popular belief is that men tend to look for peace and quiet to cope with stressful situations in contrast to women, who look for a chat to cope with the stress of everyday life and enjoy their time (Gray 2004; Pease and Pease 2016). In my experiences of growing up in Japan, I saw generally more men than women enjoyed drinking and talking for hours at the end of the working week. This experience made me sceptical about this gendered perception of women in Myanmar. As a gender researcher, I have come to realise that such perceptions are built upon the gender perspectives that societies usually impose on individuals (Cornwall 2000). Yet, what I found even more surprising was how this perception surfaced in many of the rural fishery communities where I conducted my fieldwork.

A gendered pattern of behaviour that emerged in the focus-group discussions is one of the most undeniably astonishing findings that I came across, and one that made me reconsider what these so-called relationship books talk about. In each of the four villages, where my research was based, I conducted separate focus group discussions with a male group and a female group, each comprising 5-6 participants representing different

³ The Network Activities Group is a major NGO in Myanmar that works on community development and governance throughout the country. See, <https://nagmyanmar.org/who-we-are/>

activities in the fishery value chain. I conducted easy-to-grasp activities such as mapping the fishery value chain and gender access and control matrix, but also somewhat awkward activities that go into unfamiliar concepts like identifying gender-based role associations, gendered perspectives and expectations from “male” and “female”. In all four villages, I observed that the focus group discussions with men were quiet and consisted of minimal conversations, making the atmosphere serious with almost no smile or laughter. Often, I would have to ask additional questions to the set questions I had prepared in order to get the information I sought. In instances where they found the questions or topic awkward, they would only show an awkward smile in response. On the other hand, the focus-group discussions with women were always “chatty”, making the atmosphere lively with constant talking and laughing. In one of the villages, women could not stop laughing at the fact that we were asking them about what roles they associated with “male” and “female” in the community. Yet, from the reports of researchers who conducted the women’s focus-group discussions, we found that most of their chats were neither relevant nor helpful in achieving the objective of the activity.

In another case, while we were informally talking with the women of the house where focus-group discussions were held, they told us that “men must listen to our concerns and our issues, and if they don’t listen we will make them listen, because we are strong enough to do so and that is what they need to do to be good husbands.” This particular case surprised me for two reasons; first that women do indeed want to talk about and ask for a partner who will listen to their concerns, and second, women do have the power to ask for such things to men within the household. In *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*, which has become one of the greatest bestsellers writing about relationships, Gray (2004) states that men will withdraw into solitude to deal with the issues he faces while women will look to share her issues with people whom she trusts, and in doing so demand such attention from their partners. Assuming that these women and men in Myanmar’s rural fishery communities might have never come across such books, their statement presumably comes from the gendered perceptions that their society has imposed on them. This made me consider where gender perceptions come from and how they can interestingly be identical across cultures sometimes.

3. GENDER PERSPECTIVES AND OCCASIONAL CONTRADICTIONS

Another unexpected finding, and one that has confused me in my interpretation of gendered perspectives in Myanmar's rural fishery communities, is how women, being associated to "home," do not always mean restricted mobility. When I conducted fieldwork in an inland village where fish processing is a popular livelihood option for women, I found that these female fish processors were one of the most mobile, making regular travels of approximately 2-3 hours one-way to Yangon's central market and back to sell their products directly to fish traders and the middlemen. However, at the same time, I observed that women are associated with the "home", responsible for everything ranging from house chores and raising children to collecting fish from fishing nets and fish processing. In the light of works of gender researchers such as Resurreccion (2006), which show that women's association with home restricts their overall mobility, my observations in Myanmar troubled my interpretation of this association between women and home. This was even more troubled when I compared these results with the results of the focus group discussions with female actors. In a delta-area village, from where access to Yangon's central market would require approximately five hours of travel one-way, two hours by boat to the regional city and then another 2-3 hour by bus to Yangon, female fish collectors stated that the women stayed home, and the men travelled. In interviews, these female fish collectors, who are engaged in the business with family and relatives, stated that women stay at home and take responsibility for collecting fish and managing finance, while men travel with the fish products to the market to ensure safe delivery and payment from collectors in the central market. While a comparison between fish processors and fish collectors from different regions is difficult, a possible interpretation is that two gender perceptions, "women are chatty, thus are more suited for bargaining and sales" and "women are associated with home" clashed but the former trumps the latter for leveraging economic gains and influences women's mobility related to sales activity, which is counterposed to their predominant role of homemaker. Such contradicting findings have made me realize the complexity of gender studies, and how it can change depending on various aspects such as culture, time and location.

4. LEARNING THE COMPLEXITY OF GENDER RESEARCH

As is often concluded in gender research and observed in rural fishery communities, women are associated with “home” and “being chatty”, thus often making them responsible for house chores and raising children as well as selling their products (Resurreccion 2006). In our fieldwork in Myanmar’s rural fishery communities, we came across unexpectedly universal gendered behaviour such as women being chatty and wanting someone to listen to their issues and at the same time unexpectedly contradicting gendered behaviour by being the most mobile at the same time associated with home. Such mixed findings made my interpretation of the gender perspectives in these rural fishery communities difficult, but at the same time made me appreciate what gender studies have always emphasized: gender differs based on many factors such as time, culture, location, and society.

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