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EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE FISHERIES: A NECESSITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Women empowerment, a global befitting revelation, steers countries towards growth, bridging socio-economic disparity, and promoting gender equity. Today's exploration aims to dissect women empowerment in our modern society through fisheries, seeking to shed light on its influence and assess the constraints inhibiting its full spectrum realisation. Women empowerment advocates for women to access control over resources and decisions, reaffirming their rightful place as pivotal contributors to society (World Bank, 2021). Hinged upon an egalitarian vision, women empowerment fuels positive societal transformation by celebrating and advancing women's significant societal contributions. In the patriarchal tapestry of most societies, a popular misconception has been woven that the realm of fisheries predominantly belongs to men. A crusty stereotype is perpetuated, ignoring the significant contributions made by women in the fisheries sector worldwide. This essay hinges on the declaration that empowerment of women in fisheries is essential because of their substantial contribution to the sector, the need for *gender equity*, and the potential *socio- economic* benefits they bring.

Women in Fisheries

Women's role in fisheries is a topic sparsely illuminated. The impression that fishing is all about casting nets and catching fish shows a lack of understanding of the full scope of fisheries (FAO, 2019). From net-making, baiting, fish processing, and marketing to management roles, women's participation has been substantial. According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (2019), women constitute about 14% of all people directly employed in the capture fisheries sector globally. Their roles, although often less visible, shouldered the back-end jobs that ensured the functioning of this sector.

The pillar for empowering women in fisheries stems from the universal need for gender equality. Justice and fairness are not exclusive to any particular sector. Hence, gender

equity in fisheries is a cause worth fighting for. According to the World Bank report (2014), embracing gender equality in industries such as fisheries could lead to increased productivity, more sustainable outcomes and improve overall well-being of communities. The UN Women's report (2020) further highlighted the importance of gender-responsive policies for understanding and ameliorating the challenges faced by women in the sector.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Women Empowerment

Empowering women in fisheries also reaps economic benefits. When women wield economic power, they can upturn not only their lives but the whole local economy. Unleashing their full potential in fisheries could catalyze rural development and reduce poverty (World Fish Center, 2012). A report from the World Fish Center (2012) found that in developing countries, women's income from fisheries activities was often channeled into household expenditures, thereby bettering the family's nutrition and educational opportunities.

The economic implications of women empowerment in fisheries is corroborated by a study commissioned by the International Centre for Research on Women (2019). It emphasizes that investing in women's productive capabilities in the fisheries sector can lead to increased productivity and profitability. Therefore, tearing down the gender stereotypes around 'suitable jobs for women' can actually reap benefits for all involved. However, while these benefits are substantial, entrenched gender norms and biases prevent women from fully engaging in and benefiting from the fisheries sector. A considerable gender gap exists; globally, women earn, on average, 64 per cent of what their male counterparts earn for the same work (World Economic Forum, 2020). These gender disparities could be mitigated through more supportive policies and interventions that recognise and promote women's contributions.

Challenges Faced by Women

1. **Limited access to land:** In many countries, men tend to have exclusive land ownership, making it difficult for women to access land for activities like aquaculture
2. **Lack of control over resources:** Even when women can access resources, they may not have effective control over how to use them. For example, women working in homestead ponds may have little decision-making power over them.

3. **Gender norms:** Gender norms and expectations can limit women's adoption and use of aquaculture knowledge, technologies, and practices. For instance, in some cultures, certain tasks like harvesting in aquaculture ponds are seen as "men's work," making it socially taboo for women to participate.
4. **Limited mobility:** Women's primary responsibility for managing the household and caregiving can limit their time available for paid work and restrict their ability to travel far from home.
5. **Time and labor burdens:** Women often face multiple burdens, including managing the household, childrearing, and caring for sick or aging relatives. This can create a heavier workload for women and limit their ability to engage in income-generating activities.
6. **Insecurity in informal work:** Women in the fisheries and aquaculture labor force often lack social protection, employment contracts, and benefits. They may also be underrepresented in policy discussions, which hinders their ability to have decent work.
7. **Entrepreneurship challenges:** Women in some countries may face challenges in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures compared to men. Factors such as lack of finances, limited access to assets, and gender norms can contribute to women discontinuing businesses.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

Addressing gender barriers is crucial for achieving gender equality and empowering women in fisheries and aquaculture. Strategies to overcome these barriers include creating pro-equality gender policies, promoting women's entrepreneurship, providing access to finance and resources, challenging gender norms, and recognizing and addressing the time and labor burdens faced by women.

To fully grasp the extent and importance of women's involvement in fisheries, a renewed comprehension of the *fisheries' value chain* concept is pivotal. value chain includes not only the stages involved in harvesting but also in processing and selling fishery products, all of which fall under women's purview (FAO, 2016). Consequently, strengthening the position of women in the fisheries sector starts by acknowledging their vast contribution to the value chain and enhancing their visibility within it. Value chain interventions should be

gender-sensitive and customized to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in the fishing industry.

Education and training are indispensable tools for empowerment. The issue at hand is not a lack of willingness or capacity to learn, but a lack of opportunity. Providing women with equal access to education and technical training in fisheries science, market strategies, business management and financial literacy not only builds their capacities but promotes their financial independence and autonomy - keys to empowerment.

Institutional reforms also play a crucial role in fostering gender equity in the fisheries sector. This includes engendering fisheries-related policies to enforce laws that promote the employment and protection of women in fisheries (HDR, 2013). Provisions such as ensuring safety and health standards, decent working hours and payment of fair wages must be ensured for women in the sector.

Support must also be given to *women's organizations and cooperatives* in the fisheries. Women working together can provide mutual support, share knowledge, improve bargaining power and contribute to policy-making processes (Weeratunge et al., 2010). Encouraging these collective actions can also protect their interests and uphold their rights, making the sector more equitable.

Lastly, there's a need to foster an environment that encourages and values the participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels, from local fisheries management to national and international policy-making fora. Inclusive decision-making not infrequently leads to improved societal outcomes and greater resource sustainability (Aguilar, 2008)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the empowerment of women in the fisheries sector is conceptually and pragmatically essential. By empowering women in fisheries, we are not merely advocating for gender equality. Instead, we're setting the stage for magnified economic growth opportunities that can propel our societies forward. The broader community rarely acknowledges the significant contribution that women make within the fisheries sector. This overlooks the potential for sustainable growth and development that could be acquired by empowering these women. It's imperative therefore, that this sector takes the necessary steps to recognise, equally educate, protect and encourage the active participation of women in

decision-making processes. The strategies outlined above not only serve to empower women in the sector but also set a firm foundation for the sustainable development of the fisheries sector providing an equitable future for all.

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