

WOMEN IN FRESHWATER FISHERIES IN SOUTH ASIA: SCOPING CASE STUDIES FROM INDIA AND BANGLADESH

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India and Bangladesh are two important South Asian countries which are rich in freshwater resources and where freshwater fisheries constitute an important facet of livelihood for small-scale women fishers, who either do subsistence fishing or assist their families in ancillary activities. However, they have received little attention, in spite of the different ways that women engage in freshwater fisheries and different issues they face, in contrast to women in coastal fisheries. This study analyzes (i) women's role in freshwater fisheries comprising lakes, reservoirs, floodplain wetlands, and rivers, (ii) women's contribution in post-harvest activities, and (iii) women's position vis-à-vis policies and regulations, in both the countries, as a part of an emerging global effort to provide a better focus on women's contribution and their status in freshwater fisheries.

In India, women participate in freshwater fisheries in lakes, rivers, and floodplain wetlands, often exhibiting similar engagement patterns along with some habitat-specific activities. They typically form small fishing groups and are involved in community fishing, post-harvest activities such as drying and processing fish, and marketing, besides engaging in door-to-door sales. Their contributions also include fabricating fishing gear, collecting bait, handling coracles, canoes and nets when fishing with their husbands in reservoirs, and harvesting molluscs and aquatic plants from wetlands and lakes. Most importantly, women play a vital role in enhancing the nutritional security of their households by catching small indigenous fish from wetlands. Despite such vital contributions, women rarely hold leadership positions, limiting their influence in management decisions.

In Bangladesh, traditionally, women's participation in freshwater fisheries is witnessed in collecting aquatic plants and snails in wetlands. Significant participation of women was observed in activities such as fish sorting and grading, cleaning and salting but is often accompanied by discriminatory practices in terms of pay. The way climate change is affecting freshwater ecosystems in Bangladesh is posing major socio-economic challenges for women who rely on them.

There are regional variations in women's participation in freshwater fisheries across the countries, which are influenced by cultural, traditional and societal norms. A significant policy issue is access to fishing rights, considering gendered fishing practices, spaces, and gears. Government policies and programmes should be sensitive to address women's practical and strategic needs for gender transformative changes to happen.