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Gendering the Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector in Egypt

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Introduction

“Gender” has been receiving a special attention in the global agriculture and food security agenda in recent decades. This is in part because women who play a major role in the agricultural production and food supply in many developing countries face more severe constraints than men in access to productive resources that could help them improve their productivity. Moreover, women in developing countries are confronted by diverse types of discrimination in agricultural labor markets and have lower level of influence in decision-making processes.

Women contribution to agricultural production systems and rural economy in developing countries cannot however be underestimated; they comprise about 40 percent of the agricultural labor force, produce between 60-80 percent of the food, and they are the main producer of staple crops which provide up to 90 percent of the rural poor’s food intake (FAO, 2014).

In Egypt, women contribute to most of the agricultural and farming-related activities including producing crops, tending animals, harvesting, post harvesting activities, and marketing of commodities. It is estimated that about 46 percent of female work force in Egypt is employed in agriculture. Furthermore, women make up more than 30 percent of the agricultural labor force and represent about 75 percent of the employment in harvesting, handling, sorting and packing processes within the post-harvest centers in Egypt (CAPMAS, 2013; UN, 2013).

This article is based on the primary results of a larger research project led by the author that investigates challenges for women participation in the Egyptian fishing and aquaculture industry.

Women in fisheries and aquaculture industry in Egypt

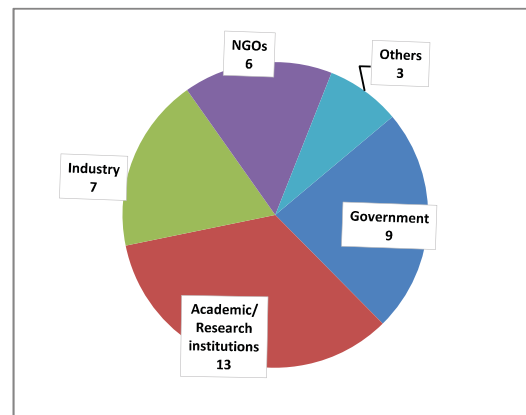
There has been a growing commonsense in the literature that more women’s involvement in fisheries and aquaculture (F&A) is a major step to increasing fish production and achieving food security in developing countries. A look at the Egyptian case however shows that F&A is one of these sectors where the role of women is not yet fully recognized.

Although this sector has grown remarkably over the last three decades and the country has presently the largest aquaculture industry in Africa with a market value of over USD1.3 billion, significant gaps still exist between men and women in terms of value chain participation and employment opportunities. For instance, available statistics reveal that women represent no more than 1 percent of the over 150,000 people employed in the Egyptian F&A sector.

Constraints hindering women participation in fisheries and aquaculture sector

This section summarizes the primary results of interviews carried out with 38 key informants in Egypt on the major barriers that constrain more involvement of Egyptian women in the F&A industry and the potential interventions to tackle these challenges. Interviewees included people occupying middle or senior level position in one or more of the following categories; government-related agriculture and fishery departments, academic and research institutions, industry-related organizations, non-government organizations, and people with experience in the area of women’s roles and contributions to agricultural and rural industries in Egypt (see figure 1).

Figure 1
Distribution of interviewees by institutional affiliation
(n= 38).



Source: Results of the interviews

According to the interviewees' opinions, the involvement of Egyptian women in F&A sector was envisaged of having the potential to not only uplift the social and economic conditions of poor rural households, but it also has the potential to improve family nutrition. Nonetheless, the interviewees pointed out that Egyptian women are challenged with a set of barriers that narrow down their options for involvement and employment in the F&A industry. The following paragraphs briefly summarize these barriers based on their relative importance as identified by the interviewees.

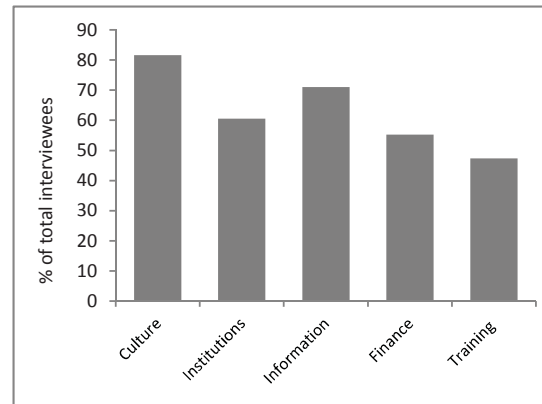
Sociocultural barriers

Gender-based barriers related to the customary cultural norms remain the main obstacle that restricts Egyptian women from participation in the F&A. Despite numerous policies adopted by the Egyptian government along with several projects carried out by women-mainstreaming institutions and NGOs to socially and economically empower women, there are several economic sectors and activities that Egyptians still consider as men's job and not suitable for women, including F&A. Such gender norms remain tenacious and the result being that women are at a disadvantage in in the F&A industry. According to Madanda (2003), these socio-cultural factors imposed on women by the society as well as psychological factors imposed internally by women concerns and aspirations inhibit their participation and employment in different activities within the fish value chains.

Lack of information

The issue of the almost complete absence of gender disaggregated data across the F&A value chain has come out strongly during the interviews. Interviewees indicated that women are significantly involved in the F&A sector but this is not captured by labor statistics because much of their involvement is informal, unpaid or unreported. This in turn contributes to an underestimation of women's role in the F&A sector and makes it difficult to address gender-related issues including unequal employment opportunities. Also, it partially explains the little policy attention given to the gender dimension (women) of this sector and the reason that sectorial support cannot be channeled properly to women. A reason for gender information unavailability originates from the obvious gap in research on women in Egyptian F&A industry, while to the best of the author's knowledge this issue seems to be almost completely neglected by researchers within both the social and natural sciences.

Figure 2
**Major constraints to women involvement
in the F&A sector in Egypt**



Source: results of the interviews

Weak Institutions

Several interviewees acknowledged the inefficiency of government departments, women NGOs and fishing societies and cooperatives in Egypt as a factor determining the little attention that has so far been given to women role and potential within the F&A industry. Women-targeted income-generating activities implemented by these institutions revolve predominantly around traditional small scale agribusiness activities, ignoring the F&A businesses, and they rarely include programs for addressing gender inequalities in the F&A sector. Furthermore, a number of interviewees pointed out that women are not well-represented in fishing-related organizations and relevant decision-making authorities in Egypt. Besides, aquaculture extension services in Egypt were viewed as under-performing and rudimentary due to the lack of skilled staff and financial constraints.

Limited access to finance and credit facilities

By and large, government funding for F&A sector was described by the interviewees as limited and insufficient to the sector's needs and potentials. Many interviewees agreed that women are always encountered by multiple obstacles to access to finance and loans from banks and other formal financial institutions to invest in their F&A businesses. This was mainly attributed to the nature of most of rural micro-finance programs and credit schemes in Egypt which are basically designed to target male clients and tend to be biased against women. More often than not, financial institutions are usually reluctant to provide credit to women because they neither have land titled under their name nor they own assets or other resources to which they have access to borrow against. In many rural communities, even if women own land and assets, they lack full independence in controlling and managing these assets. Furthermore, from banks' point of view, lending to women is perceived risky as they are regarded less qualified to manage businesses towards growth and profitability.

Therefore, banks pose stricter collateral requirements on female borrowers. This result from the interviews coincides with the findings of El-Mahdi (2006) which reveal that Egyptian women are required to provide collateral on average 25-30 percent higher in value than that required from men. El-Mahdi shows also that female-owned small and medium sized enterprises experience higher rates of rejection from banks. Another factor that was highlighted during the interviews is the higher levels of illiteracy among females in rural and coastal communities which limit their ability to understand the terms and conditions of financial products which are available to them. All these constraints discourage women from full participation in F&A activities and keep them trapped within the low nodes of the value chain.

Lack of learning and training opportunities

The interviewees from academic and research institutions specially spotlighted the lack of skills as one of the main constraints for entry of women into F&A sector. It was also highlighted that the numbers of female students in F&A higher education programs are much lower than male student numbers. However, some interviewees indicated that the number of female students have been on the rise since the last decade. This goes in line with the results of several studies which revealed that access to productive resources is often associated with low levels of educational attainment. Inadequate technical training for women on related F&A skills and techniques was cited also another impeding factor. The majority of training programs offered by public and non-governmental organizations were viewed by interviewees as non-women friendly and very few of them are targeting women. Another dimension of the lack of training for women in F&A was attributed to other factors by which women are confronted including time burdens; women are usually involved in productive and reproductive tasks within the household, therefore they have little time to attend training and educational programs. Such lack of education and training opportunities for women results in persistent employment barriers that do not allow their full potential to be exploited.

Concluding remarks

To empower the role of Egyptian women in the F&A sector and realize their full potential, it is essential to address social and cultural norms resisting women participation along the F&A supply chain. Efforts by respective government and non-government organizations should be undertaken to appropriately address the gender dimension in agricultural and fisheries development policies, and to fully recognize the contributions and the positive effects of women participation in the F&A industry on poverty alleviation, local development and food security in Egypt.

There is a need also to develop an accurate database with disaggregated statistical information on women's role and participation in F&A industry. This should be seen as a first step in raising awareness of gender issues in the F&A industry. Further research is also needed to help understand the problems of gender inequality in F&A and to best address them.

In most cases, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of different actors within the F&A industry in gender issues to raise awareness of major drivers of gender inequality and to explore the best ways to promote equality in the F&A so that different stakeholders incorporate that into their programs and projects within the sector. Facilitating the access of women to affordable start-up capital and financial services for F&A purposes is pertinent. This could be achieved by motivating financial institutions to provide more credit schemes and make loans available to women at low interest rates and with adequate period of moratorium.

Last but not least, several cross-country studies concluded that education and participation in training programs is a key-influencing factor that can give women access to a greater range of employment in F&A. More training opportunities, incentives should therefore be provided to equip women with knowledge and skills that can encourage their entrepreneurship in the F&A.

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