

WOMEN AT THE CENTER STAGE: RECONCEPTUALIZING FEMALE AGENCY AS THE CORE FOR A FEMINIST AGENDA IN FISHERIES RESEARCH – A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES

MULHERES NO CENTRO DO PALCO: RECONCEITUALIZANDO A AGÊNCIA FEMININA COMO O NÚCLEO PARA UMA AGENDA FEMINISTA EM PESQUISAS SOBRE PESCA – UMA BREVE DISCUSSÃO SOBRE DILEMAS E DESAFIOS

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ABSTRACT: Along the last decades, a growing body of research has focused on the multiplicity of roles and contributions of women to the fisheries sector worldwide, resulting in an increased recognition in national and international policy instruments. However, this increased recognition in global research has not always put the focus on the role of women in performing this change. Building upon the results of a published literature review on women in fisherfolk organizations and collective action in fisheries, we call the attention to the greater focus that researchers have placed in pointing to the structural factors as enablers of women's collective action and propose an expanded role for academics working on the topic. Specifically, this paper suggests that feminist fisheries research should put more focus on women themselves as agents of change to balance academics' current focus on the structural conditions that enable change. This brief is therefore a call to action to re-conceptualize female agency in fisheries research.

KEYWORDS: female agency; feminist agenda; women in fisherfolk organizations.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, a growing body of literature has emerged calling the attention to the multiplicity of women's roles, involvement and contributions in

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fisheries (WEERATUNGE; SNYDER; CHOO, 2010; FAO, 2016; WORLD BANK, FAO, WORLDFISH CENTER AND ARD, 2012; HARPER et al., 2017; HARPER et al., 2013; KLEIBER; HARRIS; VINCENT, 2014, 2015). This body of literature addresses a number of different topics, from roles in pre- and post-harvest activities to women's participation in the catch sector, bringing to the fore the stark contrast between women's participation and the lack of recognition at different levels, which ultimately leads to a lack of rights. This lack of recognition is especially sharp when it comes to women's participation, for example, in fisheries governance. Effective participation of resource users in fisheries management is a contentious and complex issue and takes multiple forms depending on the governance structure, the complexity of the fishery, the historical relationship amongst stakeholders and the organizational level of the different actors in the fishery to legitimately represent the collective voices in decision making fora. This marginalization from decision making fora should be interpreted as the result of the so-called institutional dimension of poverty, where small scale fishers and women in the sector are often victims of social exclusion, lack of power voice and disconnection to territory and culture (JENTOFT; EIDE, 2011). As recognized by the SSF Guidelines, addressing poverty in fisheries requires collective action by a number of constituencies, including fishers and fish workers themselves. Yet, the initiation of collective action and the development of organizations face a number of challenges, such as the lack of financial resources, poor organization skills, lack of time and priorities more focused on family wellbeing; other issues such as the fragmentation of local communities, social conflict, and scattered locations are conditions that are normally not conducive to collective action (JENTOFT et al., 2018).

In a recent literature review on women's participation and leadership in fisherfolk organizations, Alonso-Población and Siar (2018) analyze the different enabling factors and drivers leading to the development of women's collective action in fisheries. The authors identify a number of enablers and entities involved in fostering women's participation in collective action and organizations that are highlighted in the literature. These include support from state institutions, social movements and civil society organizations, external support from development aid or conservation projects,

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the role of religious movements, academia, social, political and ideological change, individual agency and convergence and coincidences. While only two papers are referred hypothesizing that women's collective action is the result of coincidences, the majority of the papers cited in the document refer to external factors as enablers of women's collective action. In contrast, only a few papers emphasize the role of women themselves as protagonists of collective action and leaders of fisherfolk organizations. The fact that women's agency, in this body of literature, is only highlighted in few papers as the key in fostering collective action for social change contributes to cultural perceptions rooted in western cosmology. Building upon this finding, in this opinion paper we discuss on the need to reconceptualize agency in fisheries research and problematize about the consequences of the researchers' focus on external factors as the reason for women's collective successes, calling for the need to adopt alternative theoretical approaches that place women at the center stage in fisheries research. The aim of this paper is to inform a research agenda through which women are brought to the center stage and briefly identify some of the challenges that will be found in the implementation of such an agenda.

CULTURALLY UNDERPINNED CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

Anthropology has unveiled at least four interlinked core components of Western cosmology, such as the idea of progress (SZTOMPKA, 1995), the radical separation between the realms of nature and culture (see e.g., DESCOLA, 2005; LATOUR, 2007) or the idea of the “self-pleasing man” who lives in permanent tension with coercive society (SAHLINS et al., 1996). In the words of Marshall Sahlins, “these cosmic [...] are native cultural structures of the long term that still inhabit academic anthropology – as well as other Western social sciences – and bedevil our understandings of other peoples” (SAHLINS et al., 1996, p. 395). A fourth element that can be considered at the heart of western cosmology is the conceptualization of men as the owners of agency, and women as dispossessed of this attribute. Linked to this conceptualization is the

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common trend to consider women as community or family oriented, in contrast to the men, regularly deemed as the self-oriented individuals. In her classic paper in feminist anthropology, Sherry Ortner (1974) suggests that women's subordination to male derives from the cross-cultural symbolic association with nature and of men with culture, which, following Ortner's argument, "at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to 'socialize' and 'culturalize' – nature" (Ortner, 1974). Researchers have an outstanding role in contesting these biases by promoting a research agenda that reverses these perceptions by giving back agency to women and recognizing women's transformative capacity.

Challenges

Postmodern anthropology has called the attention to the fundamental biases inherent in social research outcomes (CLIFFORD; MARCUS, 1986). These may involve many different factors affecting authors' analyses. A new research agenda for women in fisheries that emphasizes the transformative role of women has to take into consideration a number of challenges.

Theoretical Approaches

A factor that heavily influences the results of the analyses are the different theoretical approaches used. Emphasizing women's agency require the use of theoretical approaches that place the focus more on women's transformative capacity and analyze how individuals and groups make use of the tools they have available to enroll and lead collective action. This does not mean leaving the analyses of the structural factors behind, but placing a different focus on the structural (economic, political, etc.) elements of social change and more on the role of individuals and groups.

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Methodological Factors

In an analysis of the effects of the use by researchers of a spacial metaphor (men-sea/women-land) in social sciences research in fisheries, Alonso-Población and Niehof (2019) call the attention that such a metaphor is not only an artifact used by researchers, but also a culturally underpinned normative emic model that obscures the multiplicity of roles and contributions of women to the sector in local discourse. This fact reveals that emic discourses and narratives may also portray cultural biases that neglect women's agency. This reflection brings to the fore the methodological aspects of this change of approach for a new feminist agenda in fisheries research, specifically the need to go beyond data analysis and discourse research and the need for a greater focus on participant observation.

Economic and institutional factors

The need for research funding may act as a barrier to adopt a research agenda more focused on women's agency. In no few cases, research funding comes from private and public institutions with their own agendas, which may drive research focus to the role of specific institutions in development aid interventions, conservation projects or policy changes. A challenge for individual researchers will be to balance their institutional and economic needs with the needs of the women that are subjects of their inquiries and enable their research.

DISCUSSION

Along the last decades a growing body of research has focused on the multiplicity of roles and contributions of women to the fisheries sector worldwide (e.g., WEERATUNGE; SNYDER; CHOO, 2010; HARPER et al., 2017; HARPER et al., 2013; KLEIBER; HARRIS; VINCENT, 2014), resulting in an increased recognition of women's roles in fisheries amongst institutions (FAO, 2016; WORLD BANK, FAO,

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WORLD FISH CENTER AND ARD, 2012) as well as in national and international policy instruments (FAO, 2015). The increased recognition of women's work and their contributions in the fisheries has not been a linear process (BRITTON, 2012) and despite the recent achievements, there is still a lot to do in order to achieve full recognition not only of women's work, but also of women's full rights as workers and citizens. Research institutions and scholars have a key role in the collective endeavor of raising recognition of women's work in fisheries and contesting the popular images that inform research (NADEL-KLEIN; DAVIS, 1988). Researchers have deployed a number of different strategies to contest these androcentric perspectives. The first of them is ethnographic, and consists in using ethnographic examples where women are directly involved in sea-fishing to the fore and theorizing on the basis of these. The second strategy is conceptual, and entails broadening the concept of fishing to encompass all non-sea-hunting related tasks. The third strategy is ontological, and involves showing interdependency and the transformative capacity of women (ALONSO-POBLACIÓN; SIAR, 2018). In this paper, we argue that in order to contest cultural biases that strengthen the notion of women as dispossessed of agency more investments need to be made in the latter. Yet, we point that doing so requires considering specific theoretical and methodological approaches that pose economic challenges for researchers.

Commonly, academics involved in research on women in fisheries are moved by the political goal to use their research to help with bettering women's lives by calling the attention to the structural constraints that prevent them to receive social recognition, enjoy full rights as workers and citizens. Moving to an approach that places the focus on women's agency and transformative capacity may be perceived as a threat to the political goal of using research for policy and legal change. Yet, we suggest that doing so may bring a number of benefits, the main of them contesting the cultural bias that conceptualizes women as dispossessed of agency and men as self-pleasing agency owners.

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CONCLUSION: NEW RESEARCH AND DILEMMAS

Reconciling a feminist approach that places more focus in women's roles in social change with the goal of using research to contribute to the betterment of women in the sector may seem a contradicting task as may be perceived by researchers as a way to obscure the structural factors that hinder women's enjoyment full rights. However, doing so will contribute to the end goal of contesting the cultural biases around women's transformative capacity, serving as well as inspiration for change. Addressing this dilemma by balancing these two needs, namely contesting the cultural bias and publicly bringing to light the policy dimension of women's marginalization in fisheries need to be balanced. In this paper we suggest that these two positions are not well balanced in current academic literature in fisheries research and contend that balancing these will require a new feminist agenda in fisheries research that re-conceptualizes women's agency and places greater focus on women's transformative capacity.

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