

Trends in small-scale fishery in Myanmar:

Tenure rights and gender in Mon State and Tanintharyi Division

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Abstract

Myanmar's fishery sector is increasingly celebrated for its potential, and the country's role as a major international source of fishery products (through wild-capture as well as aquaculture) is expected to expand further with investment in the years to come. Dramatic changes are reshaping the small scale-fishery sector, driven by new investment and diverse government policies oriented toward opening up the country. Amidst all this, the voices and aspirations of those who are among those being most affected by these dynamics – men and women in the small-scale fishery sector – are mostly invisible. The SSF Guidelines, along with the VG Tenure, committed States to the cross-cutting principle of gender equality and all parties to “support small-scale fishing communities, in particular to indigenous peoples, women and those relying on fishing for subsistence, including, as appropriate, the technical and financial assistance to organize, maintain, exchange and improve traditional knowledge of aquatic living resources and fishing techniques, and upgrade knowledge on aquatic ecosystems” (para. 11.7). This article traces the process and reflects on the findings of the first step in such a journey currently being undertaken jointly with several small scale fishing communities and local support organizations in Mon State and Tanintharyi Region in Myanmar, to test using the SSF Guidelines in settings marked by major pressures from various forms of control over key resources, for agribusiness, large-scale extraction of oil and minerals and for special economic zones.

Introduction

“Fish is the world's most traded food commodity, and Myanmar is on the cusp of becoming a major international source”²

Myanmar's fishery sector is increasingly celebrated for its potential. Currently the ninth largest producer of marine capture fisheries in the world, the country's role as a major international source of fishery products (through wild-capture as well as aquaculture) is expected to expand with investment (FAO, 2016a), and as Myanmar “rapidly open[s] up to increased coastal and marine investments” (Pei-Ya, 2016). The optimism over investment opportunities and rising economic expectations are typically ascribed to the ‘opening up’ of Myanmar through an ambitious political-economic reform agenda pursued since 2011 (Jones, 2014a). As many new actors get involved in Myanmar's fisheries policy, the goal to “improve

¹ This working paper has been published as a chapter in FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper No. 644. The original Technical paper that includes other case studies from across the world is available here:

<http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CA3041EN> The authors would like to thank Pietje Vervest (TNI), Clara Mi Young Park (FAO, Regional Office for Asia Pacific), Lena Westlund (FAO Consultant), Susana Siar (Fishery and Aquaculture Officer, FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific) for very helpful comments. We are particularly grateful to Pietje Vervest and Clara Mi Young Park for very helpful support at different stages of fieldwork. Any errors are our own.

² Myanmar Fisheries Partnership. 2016, p.1. http://pubs.iclarm.net/resource_centre/MFP-01-Overview.pdf

fisheries management to capture more economic, social and environmental benefits for the long-term” is laudable and important (Myanmar Fisheries Partnership, 2016).

Relevant here are the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (hereinafter SSF Guidelines) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which “makes human rights, particularly of vulnerable and marginalized groups, measurements of progress in fisheries governance and development”.³ The SSF Guidelines are linked to the FAO’s Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (hereinafter VG Tenure), which commit States to the cross-cutting principle of gender equality (3B-4) in relation to tenure and establish that “Where States own or control land, fisheries and forests, the legitimate tenure rights of individuals and communities, including where applicable those with customary tenure systems, should be recognized, respected and protected” (8.2). The SSF Guidelines provide guidance on how to promote sustainable small-scale fishery including the promotion of gender equality not only in the fisheries sector but also more widely in fisher communities. Gender equality is highlighted in a separate chapter and is a crosscutting concern throughout both the TGs and the SSF Guidelines. Both sets of guidelines identify gender equality as an important goal. Yet little attention has been given to date to the actual differential experience and participation of men and women in the fisheries sector in Myanmar.

This article presents an introductory investigation into gender-dynamics in small-scale fishery across four communities in Mon State and Tanintharyi Region in Myanmar’s Southeast, a region dominated by a long coastline and prized for its many offshore islands and marine wildlife. It draws on nearly 3 decades of the Transnational Institute’s (TNI) work in Burma/Myanmar. The article offers an initial exploration on the issue of gender in small-scale fishery as part of a broader ongoing action-research effort with local civil society organizations (CSOs). The discussion outlines the gendered production and reproduction of community roles and gendered access to resources and decision-making, and notes potentially new impacts along gender-lines as Myanmar’s political-economy transitions. It shows the pivotal role played by women in small-scale fishery and local and regional food systems, stressing the strategic importance of the struggle for gender equality in the pursuit of truly sustainable small-scale fishery economies. And it indicates the relevance of the two sets of guidelines in framing action research to ‘support responsible fisheries and sustainable social and economic development for the benefit of current and future generations, with an emphasis on small scale fishers and fish workers and related activities and including vulnerable and marginalized people, promoting a human rights based approach” (*excerpt from the Preface, Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication*).

Methodology

Prior FAO and TNI collaboration on the tenure guidelines has highlighted the interconnections of land rights issues with different forms of resource grabbing and conflicts, calling for more focused attention on the human rights and land rights of fishers and villagers’ responses to those issues. This study is a first step towards addressing issues of gender in fisheries in Myanmar within a larger process among local organizations of exchanging information and building analysis and advocacy. The research study

³ For the quote, see: FAO 2016. *Background paper for Exploratory Workshop: Human rights-based approach to the implementation and monitoring of the SSF guidelines*, 24-26 October, 2016, Rome, FAO p. 12 For the SSF-guidelines themselves, see: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4356e.pdf>

aims to contribute to knowledge on gender dynamics and gender relations in four coastal fishing communities in southern Myanmar. It further aims to support implementation of the FAO's SSF Guidelines by encouraging these communities to identify through action research their needs, challenges and solutions to issues they face.

A workshop in Dawei in March 2017 organized by TNI and partner organizations introduced/reintroduced several local networks of fisherfolk to the SSF Guidelines and proposed joint research, leading to further discussion with partners on a possible research agenda. Initial fieldwork was conducted from March to April 2017, followed by a validation exercise in May to gather feedback, reflect on the evidence, discuss initial findings and possible further action. A combination of research methods was used including focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews, community conversations, and participant observation building on prior experience of TNI in Myanmar on land and natural resource issues. Separate FGDs were held in four communities among married women, married men, single women/girls, single men/boys, male fishers and female fishers. Qualitative methods were supplemented with a literature review.

The four fishing communities included in the research were identified by civil society partners, based on the needs of the fisher communities and the opportunity to build on TNI's work on land and tenure guidelines. Two communities were in Ye, Mon State, and two communities in Myeik, Tanintharyi Region. All four were coastal communities and hence engaged in marine fishery and the article therefore does not consider gender aspects of inshore fishery. It should be noted that the names of villages and interviewees are not disclosed for reasons of sensitivity and privacy. Both of these regions are strategic locations within the wider struggle for control of Myanmar's natural resources and overall visions of development. Both areas are experiencing major pressures from various forms of control over key resources, for agribusiness, large-scale extraction of oil and minerals and for special economic zones.⁴

Tanintharyi is the site of massive resource extractions, agricultural and development projects including a multibillion-dollar project in Dawei that includes a deep-sea port, industrial zone, power plants and refineries (Karen News, 2014). All the villages included in the research are small, with populations of several hundred, accessible by a combination of asphalt, narrow concrete and dirt roads. There was construction on the small bridges and roads in Ye at the time of the research making road access slow. The villages in Ye, Mon State are both along the Andaman coast, predominantly communities engaged in small-scale fisheries, betel nut and rubber plantations and micro-enterprises such as retail shops and sewing. The religion is predominantly Buddhist, with Christians also represented. Participants were mostly ethnic Mon, with one or two Burmans. One of the villages in Myeik Township is close to Myeik town, along the river close to the Kyauk Phyar Bridge. Participants are in livelihoods supported by mangroves, small-scale fisheries and micro-enterprises. The religion is predominantly Christian with Buddhists also represented. Participants were mostly ethnic Karen, and some Burman. Interviews and FGDs were also conducted with community members from the small islands near Myeik town, many of whom were involved in the seafood factories operating out of the islands.

⁴ See for example, reports by the Tenasserim River and Indigenous People Network (TRIP-NET) and Dawei Development Association (DDA), including the report, "We Will Manage Our Own Natural Resources: Karen Indigenous People in Kamoethway Demonstrate the Importance of Local Solutions and Community-Driven Conservation" in <http://www.burmapartnership.org/2016/03/we-will-manage-our-own-natural-resources-karen-indigenous-people-in-kamoethway-demonstrate-the-importance-of-local-solutions-and-community-driven-conservation/>. For Mon State see reports of the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) at <http://rehmonnya.org/>

As a first step, our information-gathering was broad and wide-ranging, cursory in some areas but with the long-term aim of deepening analysis and action in the future.

Limitations

Fieldwork was undertaken over three weeks prior to the onset of Myanmar's water festival when the whole country goes on holiday. This timing and associated time pressures set limits on the depth of investigation. But as a first step in a longer iterative process of investigation, action, reflection, the research will deepen over time and thus mitigate this limitation in the long run. The villages were approached for inclusion in the study with the idea that this would be the first phase in a longer-term relationship and participatory and iterative process of surfacing, analyzing and acting to address their problems, issues, needs and concerns. In this light, the questions and issues raised, but left for the next cycle of investigation are as important as those that were asked and answered in the course of three weeks of fieldwork.

Due to the highly grassroots character of the fieldwork, language was a barrier, as the researchers do not speak Burmese, Karen or Mon, while some participants in the study were fluent in local languages but not English or even Burmese. Civil society partners provided translations during the fieldwork. Where translators were new to the issues of gender and fishery, an orientation session was conducted with them prior to going to the field. Additionally, the research tools and questionnaires were professionally translated in writing and shared with the local translators to encourage standardized translations for common words. For the validation workshops, translation was a collective effort. Professional translation had to be supplemented with additional efforts to translate into the local language. On occasion, the researchers needed to have multiple stage translations from Burmese to Mon or Karen and English.

Participation in the validation workshops was partly limited by availability of participants and by the workshop venue. Women said they could attend workshops if organized so they could still take care of responsibilities at home while attending the workshop. Some men said that their participation was limited by needing to fish or take care of family affairs. This suggests the need to conduct as many activities in grassroots spaces as possible, including workshops and trainings.

Context

Myanmar's coastline is close to 3000 km in length, encompassing large estuaries, delta systems, offshore islands, and a diversity of coastal habitats including coral reefs, mangroves, beaches and mudflats.⁵ Mon State and Tanintharyi Region form the "kite's tail" portion of Myanmar's coastline and together account for approximately 1200 km of the total.

The population of Mon and Tanintharyi is 3,462,794, with approximately 52.2% depending on agriculture, fishery and forestry for their livelihood (Department of Population, 2015). While lumping these livelihoods together glosses over important differences, it also reflects their interconnectedness and that of the natural resources on which they are based (e.g., forest, land, rivers, coasts and sea). For generations the land- and seascape have underpinned peoples' livelihoods and shaped their social and cultural identities -- including local and regional food production systems and distribution circuits that

⁵ FAO website <http://www.fao.org/fi/oldsite/FCP/en/MMR/profile.htm>

are crucial for prevention of hunger and more broadly provide a degree of autonomy from formalized and volatile food markets, enabling rural working peoples to live well, with dignity and in ways of their own choosing.⁶ Local and regional food systems have also historically connected people across ethnic divides, e.g. in Tanintharyi through the exchange of fish paste and sea salt from lowland coastal communities to highland forest communities.

Yet the marine waters and related aquatic resources are an especially prominent aspect of the whole landscape in Mon and Tanintharyi -- physically, when compared with the narrow stretch of land wedged between the sea and the Thai-border, but also because of the importance the resources in this space have had in Myanmar's political-economic development (Myoe 2016).

Myanmar is the largest fishing nation in the Bay of Bengal region (Krakstad, et.al, 2015). The Department of Fisheries, in tune with the laws and regulations formally governing the sector, divides it into an inshore fleet and an offshore fleet. The inshore fleet, what we here refer to as 'small-scale'⁷, has its fishing grounds within 10 nautical miles from the shore, on vessels less than 30 feet long and with engine power (if any) of less than 25 HP with 3-5 people on the vessel going out to sea between 1-3 days. Fishing gears used are: drift nets, gill nets and longlines. The offshore fleet's (formal) fishing grounds are from 10 nautical miles and outward to the rest of the EEZ, on vessels more than 30 feet long and with an engine power of more than 25 HP with a crew of 10-20 people and on trips spanning one to three months. Fishing gears used are: bottom trawls, purse seines, surrounding nets, drift nets and longlines (Department of Fisheries 2016). A fisheries report supported by FAO and the Norwegian government in 2015 noted that the marine capture fisheries sector contributed around 10% to the GDP with a large part of the population depending on fishery for their livelihood (ibid). Similar research in 2013 indicated serious concern including substantial decline in fish biomass and drastic changes in species composition since surveys were conducted in 1979 and 1980 (Krakstad, et al., 2013). In response, initiatives were rolled out to mitigate the declining fish stock and diminishing biodiversity in the coastal areas. Closed seasons were implemented, with little consultation with communities and little information trickling down to the villages. Closed seasons were specific times of the year when fishing and collection of sea resources were prohibited negatively impacting lives and livelihoods of small-scale fishers. Since then, Myanmar increased attention on fisheries resource and conservation. Management measures were instituted in 2013 that included closed seasons for all fishing gears for all marine waters, reduction in the numbers of fishing rafts in the Delta region, banning of foreign fishing vessels (all trawlers) and prohibition in respect to construction of local fishing vessels (Krakstad, et.al, 2015).

Myanmar had a Fisheries Law as early as 1905. But the most significant regulatory changes in the sector came after the State Law and Order Restoration Council⁸ came to power in 1988. One of the first laws put into place was the 'Fishing Rights of Foreign Vessels Law' of 1989, opening up the Andaman Sea to the fleet of Thai trawlers. In practice this was more about securing rents from the fleet as Thai-vessels

⁶ For more on this see e.g. HLPE. 2013. *Investing in smallholder agriculture for food security*. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome as well as Douwe van der Ploug. 2013. *Peasants and the art of farming*, Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing. In recognition of local food systems' importance provision 12.4 of the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security (the 'Tenure Guidelines') also obliges states to ensure that investments "promote and secure local food systems".

⁷ 'Small-scale' is not specifically defined in Myanmar's fishery laws.

⁸ The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was the precursor to the later State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

had been present since the late 1960s (Butcher 2004). SLORC also instituted the Myanmar Fisheries Law (1990) and the Freshwater Fisheries Law (1991). Amendments to these laws have been introduced since then, but the overall approach of the central state toward the sector remains largely the same: maximizing rent-extraction through a growth-oriented policy that marginalizes or ignores small-scale fishers.

For decades Myanmar's fishing communities have experienced confiscation of boats, forced labour, and forced relocations, among others.⁹ Today, important new changes in access and control of the country's vast coastal and inland aquatic resources are unfolding via a three-pronged reform agenda that started in 2010 around political reform, economic reform and peace negotiations (TNI, 2017). Different people and households may be affected differently, but everyone in the small-scale fisher communities is affected, regardless of age and sex.

The effects of economic restructuring, mechanization and commercialization since the 1970s on small-scale fisheries around the world¹⁰ and on women and gender relations in general are varied and complex.¹¹ "Fisheries development involves a blending of [modern and traditional, small-scale and large-scale, or capitalist and pre-capitalist organizational] forms in many varied ways. Traditional ways of doing coexist with modern methods and techniques, while they are themselves being modernized and adapted to new functional exigencies" (Plateau, 1989). But fishers and their communities are not the same everywhere; 'small scale sector' and 'small scale fisheries' does not represent one homogenous whole (Sunde, 2016). Globally, state, finance and environmental actors interact in complex ways to directly affect local communities, while the crisis in fishing stocks and coastal ecosystems is driving implementation of market-based mechanisms as a cure-all, putting more pressure on small-scale fishers (Barbesgaard, 2018).

The region's fisher communities are no strangers to disruptions and dislocations due to intrusions by state and capital interests. Increasingly eyed by big investors as one of the last economic frontiers,¹² historical trends initiated during the SLORC era will likely intensify.¹³ Since 2011 a raft of new laws are opening up the country's natural resources to an unprecedented degree.¹⁴ Combined with new ceasefire agreements with some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), both Mon and Tanintharyi are under pressure. The prospect of achieving massive profits has sparked the imagination of many actors stepping onto the scene. As noted by a manager of the controversial Dawei Special Economic Zone project, "You have to think of Myanmar as Thailand 50 years ago. There's nothing in the country but wilderness and cheap labour"¹⁵; or, as a foreign investor waiting to set up a tourist resort along the Tanintharyi coastline said, "This place is like Phuket 40 years ago – pure nature untouched" (p.c., October 2016).

⁹ See for example, reports from the Karen Human Rights Group (www.khrg.org), Earthrights International (www.earthrights.org) and reports from the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM).

¹⁰ See for example, Kurien, John, "Entry of Big Business into Fishing: Its Impact on Fish Economy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 13, No. 36 (Sep. 9, 1978), pp. 1557-1565.

¹¹ See for example, Samudra Reports and other papers, presentations and reports by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers through the years, www.icsf.net.

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/connorconnect/2012/11/09/myanmar-the-last-frontier/#24310c495dce>

¹³ In 1997, the military junta changed its name to State Peace and Development Council or SPDC.

¹⁴ This includes the Foreign Direct Investment Law (2012), the Virgin, Fallow and Vacant Land Management Law (2012), the Farmland Law (2012) and the Special Economic Zone Law (2014). For deeper analysis, see TNI & BCN 2013, *Access Denied: Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma*. Available at: <https://www.tni.org/files/download/accesdenied-briefing11.pdf>

¹⁵ Quoted in: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/27/world/asia/27iht-myanmar.html>

Gender in Myanmar

"Why are we talking about gender? I thought this workshop was about fisheries." (Male participant in the validation workshop)

The political-economic context influences and is influenced by gender relations and gender dynamics in all communities, including fishing communities. Despite some positive changes with regard to women's rights in Myanmar associated with the opening of political space and easing of the military's power¹⁶, negative gender stereotypes and systematic discrimination that inhibit women from achieving full equality remain entrenched. Community discourse seems to support the idea that gender equality exists in Myanmar, although evidence shows otherwise. The media perpetuates gender stereotypes and regularly portray women as timid, victimized, objectified or sexualized. Women tend to be seen as weak, in need of protection and unable to make decisions. Stigmas around sex and virginity, and the historic and continuing impact of a male-dominated powerful military and male superiority, are ingrained in society (GEN, 2015). Although the de-facto head of state in the country is a woman, no other cabinet or ministerial posts have gone to women and there is a profound under-representation of women at all levels of decision-making. After the 2015 election, women accounted for only 13.6% of national parliamentary seats and only 12.7% in state and regional parliaments (ibid). At the village level, the situation is even more dire, with only 0.25% women's participation in decision-making or policymaking bodies (UNDP, 2015). The 0.25% female village tract leaders or representatives come from upper social classes and are usually single or older (ibid). Women receive less for equal work in labour situations, while violence against women is pervasive.¹⁷

Globally about 50% of people engaged in all sectors of fisheries and aquaculture are women (FAO, 2016a). In 2014 there were more than 56.6 million fishers and fish farmers in the world (ibid), and overall, women account for more than 19 percent of all people directly engaged in the fisheries and aquaculture primary sector in 2014 (ibid). An estimated 175-233 million people are engaged in secondary activities such as processing, packaging, marketing and distribution and an estimated 700-874 million people are dependent on fisheries, aquaculture and related livelihoods.¹⁸ This means about 10-12% of the world's population. Women play many roles in small-scale fisheries (in both production and reproduction¹⁹) including as paid or unpaid workers in pre- and post-harvest activities and seafood processing plants, as family caregivers and stewards of social networks, as workers in non-fishery sectors to supplement the household income, and as members of fish worker movements and fishers' organizations.²⁰

¹⁶ For example, see "Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar: A Situation Analysis", Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2016, particularly Chapter 8, discussing advances and gaps, opportunities and challenges in promoting women's rights in Myanmar. See also Concluding Comments from the 64th Session of CEDAW Committee in 2016 at

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=1019&Lang=en

¹⁷ For example, see the report by the Gender Equality Network, "Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar", particularly Chapter 8: Economy, Work and Livelihoods, the gendered division of labour, valuation of men and women's work, women's triple burden, unequal wages and access to productive resources, pp. 71-81.

¹⁸ FAO "Engendering Statistics in Fisheries and Aquaculture, at https://genderaquafish.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/14_gee.pdf

¹⁹ See for example, reports from the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers at www.icsf.net, also FAO reports on gender in fisheries and aquaculture at <http://www.fao.org/fishery/topic/16605/en>.

²⁰ International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, webpage on Women In Fisheries, <https://wif.icsf.net/>

In Myanmar, the policy regime on gender and fisheries is rooted in the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013-2022 and other instruments. In 2013, the government rolled out the 10-year NSPAW based on twelve priority areas of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).²¹ The ambitious plan includes practical recommendations for implementation, but women's rights groups, UN agencies and policy research groups have all observed little or weak implementation.²² Myanmar acceded to CEDAW in 1997 and declared its intention to realize its obligations as a signatory, including undertaking regular state-level reporting. Through the years, civil society groups and women's rights groups have produced shadow reports. For instance, the Women's League of Burma, in its report entitled "Long Way to Go", highlighted factors that hinder women from achieving full human rights and gender equality in Myanmar.²³ Citing the powerful role of the military in society and politics, as per the 2008 Constitution that grants military complete legal autonomy, the report notes that where conflict continues in some ethnic areas, so do human rights abuses, including violence against women, and shows how these abuses are linked to struggles for control of natural resources. The country's inadequate legal system is also said to impede progress towards women's equality.²⁴

Gender refers to roles, responsibilities and expectations of men and women based on dynamic social, political, religious and economic contexts. In most societies, Myanmar included, women are disadvantaged in predominantly patriarchal social, economic and political systems. As will be seen, in the context of small-scale fishery, there is a strong tendency for men and women to be seen in terms of one-dimensional role in either harvesting or managing resources for men or post-harvest processing functions for women. This suggests the need for nuanced understanding of the different and changing roles, responsibilities, power and agency of men and women, as well as gender relations in small-scale fishery, in order to create better policy.

In general gender norms can change over time and are influenced by many factors. Women play multiple roles in the target fishing communities, but there is need to understand how values and norms around gender have changed and are changing over time as a result of new pressures on natural resources, fishing and farming communities, as well as the gendered consequences of such change on human capital potential, freedoms and expectations. Different generations and situations (younger/older, widowed/married/single, high income/low income, and high resource/low resource) are influenced by gender norms across lifetimes. According to the Tavoy Women's Union, a women's rights organization in southern Myanmar, "In Burma, girls are often denied access to education and encouraged to stay home and become wives. They grow up unaware of their basic rights and unable to participate in political decisions. Dawei (Tavoy) is geographically isolated from the rest of Burma (Myanmar), and low economic development has left the region with high levels of poverty."²⁵ There is a long way to go before gender equality is reached in Myanmar. Yet women's agency is growing and women's voice is actively promoted by civil society groups and women's rights networks, as evidenced by a vibrant women's rights scene among different ethnic groups in Myanmar.²⁶ At local levels, many groups are working to promote

²¹ See for example, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burma-launches-national-plan-empower-women.html>

²² For example, the UN Women, Gender Equality Network, Women's League of Burma.

²³ <http://womenofburma.org/cedaw-shadow-report-long-way-to-go/>

²⁴ For more on the policy, structural and cultural roots of women's discrimination in Myanmar, see shadow report of the Global Justice Center and Gender Equality Network, CEDAW, Report on Obstacles to Gender Equality in Myanmar, Prepared for the 64th Session of the Committee on the Elimination Discrimination against Women July 2016.

²⁵ <https://tavoyanwomensunion.wordpress.com/>

²⁶ See for example the Women's League of Burma (WLB) at <http://womenofburma.org/>, an umbrella organization comprised of pre-existing Burma women's organizations of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

women's rights, to eliminate gender-based violence and to promote women's participation in political and economic life.

Findings

This research found entrenched gender roles and gendered impacts for women and men in fishing communities including in labour participation, community roles and access to resources. Women were found to play a crucial – but often invisible and unacknowledged -- role in community life and the local economy including in seafood processing, pre- and post-harvest work, and marketing. There are also differential impacts on men, women, boys and girls by development projects and pressures on natural resources, including deep impacts on quality of life and livelihoods caused by lower fish stocks and conflicts between small- and large-scale fishers and government policies around licensing and other regulations.

- **Gendered productive, reproductive and community roles in small scale fishery**

Girls cannot go fishing. If they do not have a husband, they have to do other jobs like washing clothes, working for other people or gardening. *(Female participant in FGD.)*

"We didn't know about clear gender division of labour. All we know is fishing." (Male participant in validation workshop.)

In the study villages, culturally defined gender roles and social expectations for men and women are well entrenched. One women's rights activist based in Dawei said, "there is widespread acceptance of gender roles and stereotypes – of how men and women will act, what their roles in the household and community will be. People accept what their mothers and grandmothers tell them about how to act. For example, girls are taught how to act "gentle, kind and polite". Gender roles come down from parents and grandparents and are reinforced through literature, religious beliefs, the educational system, school textbooks, legislature, television shows and movies, children's games, children's clothing, tales and rhymes.²⁷

Women's roles are specific, extensive and diverse. It is women who take care of children, keep house, prepare food, and maintain the home. They are also in charge of all household expenses from the part of the income the husband will turn over to them, and they are in charge of donations to charities and monasteries, children's education and discipline, clothing and hygiene. Women typically can dispense any other income they may earn from other means, such as proceeds from retail shops, sewing, daily wage earnings. They are in charge of 'gardening', often referring to small home gardens but also working with men in betel nut and rubber plantations or in the paddy fields.

Women bear a triple burden of reproductive, productive and community management responsibilities. Their reproductive work includes child bearing but also consists of household responsibilities including cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, health care, discipline of children, clothing family members, collecting firewood and water, feeding guests. It includes overseeing children's education and religious

²⁷ See Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar, GEN, November 2015, section 9.2 pp 87-92 for a discussion on how these stereotypes and gender roles are entrenched in the educational system in Myanmar and normalized across difference institutions.

instruction. Their productive work includes daily wage activities to supplement family income, selling produce, managing small shops or market stalls, petty trade and distribution, repair and maintenance of nets and boats, collecting coastal resources, tapping rubber from rubber plantations, betel nut cultivation and harvest, producing and selling fish paste or dried shrimp. Their community management or management of collective activities and resources includes supporting monastery and church activities, supporting local councils in organizing community or religious festivals, local markets, and others. While men are often in leadership positions in the community, women focus on organizing and facilitating the community activities.²⁸

Women's productive work is seen as support to men's earning capacity (such as repair of nets), underpaid work in formal employment settings (domestic helpers or factory workers), or 'petty' activities such as managing retail shops or small market stalls. Women usually do not go out on the boats. Instead, they are involved in pre-and post-harvest activities: marketing fish catch, making fish paste, and, along with young adults or children, collecting seaweed, shellfish, mussels and oysters. They share responsibility of repair and maintenance of nets and boats. In one group discussion, a woman said, "We are dependent on men to continue fishing; we are dependent on their catch." Because women's responsibilities were often in support of men's productive roles, they usually had little decision-making power outside of the household, while at the same time their reproductive work they was time-consuming, labour-intensive, unpaid and unappreciated, resulting in chronic lack of capital and access to loans, poorer hygiene and facilities in areas where women traditionally work (such as fish markets), and low representation in leadership structures.

One fisherwoman described her responsibilities. She is one of the few women in the village who actually goes to sea to help her husband on the boat, because they are not able to afford hired help and their son is too young. Additionally, she takes care of her younger daughter and son at home, does daily wage jobs on boats as hired help to supplement income, prepares and markets their fish catch into paste, collects firewood for household needs, collects water, and does the laundry and cleaning of the house. One grandmother interviewee in her 70's, the matriarch of an all-female family, described her numerous skills and activities, which include splitting bamboo to use as ties for thatch roofing. She mobilizes children and grandchildren to work in the mangroves, imparting her skill and knowledge of mangrove resources. She keeps the family together, rooted and active in their community, after having been forcibly relocated when mangroves were destroyed due to a development project.

The fishing industry is seen in the communities as a 'man's' job. Men are the primary fishers who go out on the boats and engage in the dangerous activities at sea. Men are particularly concerned about the constant threats to their safety and livelihood from clashes with large-scale fishers in trawlers who harvest too much fish and break their nets. They are considered leaders in the community and head of the family, on whom rests the responsibility to provide for their family's needs, keep them safe and earn an income. Knowledge about traditional capture fishing practices is passed from father to son when possible. Teenage boys described learning spear fishing and diving for oysters from older persons. A 52-year old man talked about learning how to fish using one net from his father, who learned it from his father. Likewise, traditional knowledge about seafood processing such as making fish paste, processing shellfish, is handed down from mother to daughter when possible.

²⁸ For information on the evolution of women's leadership roles in the village, from the militarized environment to the preliminary ceasefire then the return to villages, see "Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar" by Karen Human Rights Group, showing the 'retreat of women's role in leadership' from being preferred as village leaders to being very marginal in community leadership, pp 22-26.

Demands on families to have basic needs met amidst dwindling natural resources, decreasing fish catch, and exploitation of resources, forces whole families to adopt new or additional roles and find alternative livelihoods or income sources. Women and children are seen as best placed to find alternative livelihoods to support the family. People cross gender roles out of necessity: for example, the middle-income woman whose husband was killed now supervises the hired labour on their three boats; or the income-poor woman who helps her husband to set hook nets because they cannot afford to hire outside help.

It was difficult to get actual income data, but families were clear that income from fishing was not enough. To make ends meet, men, women and children (girls and boys) often have to work as day labourers (in rubber or palm oil plantations); some set up tailoring or retail shops; some go abroad as migrant workers. Figures obtained on profits from making and selling fish paste varied slightly (anecdotally, around 2,000 kyat per kilo or USD1 depending on type of fish paste and market rates). Discussion made clear that preparing and selling fish/shrimp paste is a long and laborious process that involves catching the fish, drying, pounding and mixing with the fish salt, drying again and then storing and shaping into mounds/squares, and finally, selling it themselves locally, selling it to middlemen, or bringing it to sell in regional markets.²⁹

- **Gendered access to resources that affect men and women, and whole families**

“Investors have been coming to our area to look at the islands and beaches” (*Multiple participants have referred to this in FGDs*).

“We are afraid of displacement and afraid of the change it will bring” (*Female participant in FGD*).

Villagers noted regular encounters between large- and small-scale fishers at sea resulting in clashes, abuses and destruction of the latter’s nets, boats and other equipment. The presence of large-scale fishers who may or may not have licenses or concessions in the area is a key contributing factor. In general, small-scale fishers who fish closer to shore and are typically unable to reach the larger quantities and types of fish or catch the larger specimens (Hulst, 2015). This has been a problem for people in the study villages since 1975, when the Myanmar government first began giving fishing concessions to big Thai companies, and it continues to be a serious problem for them.³⁰

Meanwhile, the entry of the hotel and tourism industry has brought added pressure resulting in new land-based conflicts and complex legal and community dynamics. One of the study villages affected by a fast-growing tourism industry has seen a steep increase in land prices after one part of the village was declared a tourist zone. Large tracts of village (owned) land and surrounding areas have been sold to corporations, military and navy-linked entities. One woman interviewed reports that post-typhoon Nargis in 2009, plots of land were sold to Burman migrants from Ayerwaddy for MMK25,000 (about USD17), but that after the tourism zone was announced, prices for some land tracts jumped to as high as MMK 40 million (USD26,600). Questions arose about who owns what. People interviewed reported that many villagers who were absent from their land, perhaps some of them previously internally displaced, have returned to find it occupied by someone else. Informal discussions with villagers surfaced accounts of land grabs and forced relocations when village land is declared a tourism zone or when land is parceled

²⁹ Fish paste is a large part of the traditional food culture in Myanmar and for this reason, the effects of lowered fish catch by local small-scale fishers whose produce largely stays domestic, will have a big impact across large parts of Myanmar that relies on fish paste and sea food for their diet.

³⁰ This initial concession ended five years later when Thai fishers were accused of disguising unauthorized trawlers to look like those that had permission to fish in the area. Burmese authorities awarded new concessions to Thai companies in 1989, and in 1990 the Thai Fisheries Department had set up the Thai-Burma Fishery Co Ltd. (Kanwanich, 1998).

out to military and elite-owned companies for tourism development, and of growing confusion about boundaries and ownership.

Villagers' attitudes differed over the development of tourist attractions and facilities. In one focus group discussion with women, opinion varied. Some women said new hotel construction would bring jobs, a bigger market and higher prices for their fish/shrimps, fish paste, and other produce, and improved services and road access "mak[ing] it easier for us to go to the hospital in town". Other women were skeptical that these various changes would actually benefit villagers. For example, many households were already suffering due to dwindling stocks in their traditional fishing grounds, and there were doubts that income from tourism would trickle down to them and realization that "when the prices for food for tourists increase, the prices go up for us too." Some felt that tourism could also bring a rise in prostitution, gambling and drug use. By contrast, in the group discussion with men, views were solidly against the hotel construction and development in the coasts along the village. "Tourism benefits are for the businessman but not us" and "There are expectations of job opportunities within the tourism zone but this is uncertain." Men worried that their landing sites would be hampered or blocked by the tourist sites or the take-over by tourist companies, and felt that hotels and tourism did not necessarily bring additional market or livelihood to the local community. They felt tourism would bring more tourist 'traffic' to the waters where they usually fished. This seemed to imply that men saw how tourism projects could have a direct negative impact on their control over resources, relevance, authority and sense of identity, while at least some of the women (not all) saw livelihood opportunities that could potentially balance out the loss of control and access to community resources at a micro level.

These differences in opinion may well be linked to the gendered nature of access to (alternative) information. Indeed, the research revealed that access to education, information and alternative training was highly gendered. Men's participation was encouraged for workshops and training, seen as a man's role – fisheries workshops, land and agriculture, decision-making, political discussions, organized by civil society or church groups. Women were asked to participate in religious activities, income generating or alternative livelihood trainings such as sewing and tailoring, garden care, and other 'maternal' roles in home care and childcare. This suggests a need to find ways to bring women into a wider range of educational activities and training structures including socioeconomic and political issues, while also creating opportunities for men to gain greater understanding of the value of women's reproductive work in order to push for more fair distributions of household reproductive and caring responsibilities.

- **Gendered impacts of economic and political transition**

"Fishing is my life. This is what I have done all my life." (*Male participant in FGD.*)

"We want to stay and keep fishing." (*Interviewee in Ye township.*)

"There are partnerships between big corporations and the navy and no one listens to us." (*Male participant in FGD.*)

Development projects, pressures on natural resources, environmental damage and entry of big tourism projects, all have a different impact on men and women, boys and girls. As Myanmar undergoes economic and political transition, fisher families are experiencing deeply the pressures related to rapid advance of corporate interest and development projects on their lives and livelihoods. The study found that men are concerned about issues directly related to fish harvesting, including licensing issues, conflicts with large-scale fishers, encounters with the Navy at sea, damage to fish nets and other

equipment, the high cost of maintaining boats and equipment, and lower fish catch, and that both men and women are concerned about (and impacted by) the lower income resulting from reduced fish catch and clashes with trawling fish boats. For their part, women expressed concerns about reduced fish catch to process into fish paste, difficulties negotiating with middlemen who come to the community for their processed goods and transporting those goods to market. Villagers also spoke about the pressures on many children to leave school to help families earn an income or to help collect sea resources along the coast. Some young adults, mostly boys, are forced to engage in difficult work such as spear fishing from boats, diving for fish, or looking for oysters. For those with retail shops, girls have to help their mother and help taking care of younger siblings. In more urban areas, young adults have found work in fish factories; or earn daily wages working in retail shops or sewing.

Age, ethnicity, social status, income level, location, livelihood and religion shaped the experiences of men and women, boys and girls in the villages studies. For example, when asked, four teenage boys had difficulty imagining their futures. Two said all they wanted was to be able to continue to go to school, while the other two said they wanted to be able to earn income to help the family. All four mentioned income opportunities that tourism might bring to the community, but also expressed concern that tourism and increased traffic and income in the community could (and already had) fueled drug use and the formation of youth gangs. In the same community, the daughter of a relatively better-off fisher (who owned a boat employing three men onboard) expressed hope of going to university in Singapore, and in the adjoining community, the daughter of the village leader hoped to go to university in the United States. Both men and women expressed concerns about safety. Men are often subject to hazardous conditions at sea and have concerns about their safety at sea, especially during long periods (i.e. several days) on the boat without access to medical facilities. There was a heavier burden on men to stay out longer at sea due to lower fish catch, with greater risks for injury and illness. Consequently, women and children are left alone at home for longer periods. Women are more concerned about safety at night, as their husbands have to stay away longer; there were concerns about safety in the community or when travelling. Villagers talked about the dangers of staying out late amidst rising crime due to the lack of livelihood options. People who had worked in Thailand highlighted issues related to migration such as the risk of arrest and deportation, abuse in the work site and harassment.

Despite entrenched gender roles, the research saw evidence of redistribution of economic and household activities due to economic reasons, pressures on livelihoods and dwindling natural resources. Many children and young adults have to leave school to help earn an income. Men need to help their wife with household responsibilities if she herself needs to find a job or alternative source of income. One female participant said, "If the husband carries one weight, women also takes some weight. If I can help him, I will and if he can help me, he will."

Within the assigned gender roles in the fishing community, men and women, boys and girls usually participate in different labour sectors and chose different life paths depending on availability of resources and capital and, the individual capability. For example, those with betel nut or/and rubber plantations organize themselves differently from those who do not have land. Both women and men work the plantations, which are often some distance from the village. Children can also help in harvesting rubber or betel. Men cut the wood. Plantations (sometimes referred to as 'gardens') contribute to raising the household cash income or resources to trade creating the ground for varying degrees of social differentiation in the community. Some villagers keep ducks and harvest eggs for sale to middlemen or locally to villagers.

- **Debt and Migration**

"If there is little fish, there is not enough food, we eat little, and it is difficult for children to continue school because we don't have money." (*Female interviewee.*)

The structural roots of indebtedness of fisher families, along with the impact of policies that open up the seas to rampant overfishing by large fishing companies, make life difficult for small scale fisher households and communities. Fisher indebtedness is also linked to increasing cost of maintaining nets, boats and equipment, high cost of fuel, fish scarcity, and price control of middle merchants. The cost of net replacement is approximately MMK200,000 (USD 130) and often fishers need to borrow that money at exploitative rates. To pay off the loans or make ends meet, families of fishers engage in daily labour, make children stop schooling, or migrate to other countries, particularly Thailand and Malaysia to work in relatively higher-paying but exploitative jobs in seafood factories, construction sites or as household help. Often, a young son or daughter has to migrate to find work though there are many cases of whole families migrating, or parents leaving children with the grandparents. The migration picture is mixed: some families engage in seasonal migration while some stay for much longer periods. Villagers also migrate due to lack of opportunities in the village. Earnings from migrant work is initially used to pay debts at home and the costs for migrating (perhaps paying a broker who finds a job, for lodging and basic necessities in Thailand, transportation and documentation). Any excess earnings help pay for basic needs back home. Some families are able to accumulate enough earnings to purchase land, repair the boat, make home improvements or create other assets. There was much evidence of inter-generational migration, and patterns of work and livelihoods in Thailand sometimes form established patterns within families through several generations.

- **Gendered Planning and Decision-making**

Participation at all levels of decision-making is an aspiration for both men and women. But women were often faced marginalized in the community and at home. Women have a voice in household matters for decisions involving spending patterns, children's education, health and sanitation, housing matters but lack deeper and more involved participation at levels of community. Their perceived power seems to derive from being seen as 'in-charge' of a lot of things within the household. In many households, women are 'powerful' within those confines, while lacking power in decisions at the community level, and at the regional and state economic, social and political arenas. Sharing of household responsibilities does not, however, translate to equal sharing of power and control over resources and decision-making.

Women in the study areas were generally not included in community decision-making processes. Focus group discussions and interviews with women themselves and with leaders revealed a very basic level of participation and decision-making. "When we want to have a celebration in the community or monastery, we present the idea to the community leaders and monk and they agree." "The men decide where and how to build the house because they don't need women to decide it." "In the community meetings, the leader only calls the men and if the husband is not available then his wife can attend. Women are okay with that because it is not our job to attend the meetings. Because when they build the house, the men have to carry the heavy things." One village leader thought, "It is not good to work with women because of our culture. This is because women cannot be the head or be first, the man needs to be head. Why? Because in the past women cannot be leaders."

A lack of voice and power results in making women's issues 'invisible' in community decision making around health and safety, domestic violence, political participation and livelihoods creation. One village leader said there are no issues affecting women in the village while acknowledging the absence of a clinic where women can have safe deliveries (but claimed there had not been a single case of complicated pregnancies). He thinks there is no need to seek hospital help as women can give birth at home. The leader believed women were very safe to go out at night, stay alone at home. In contrast, one woman noted, "When there is a difficult pregnancy, we need to collect money from around the village to help us go to the hospital and pay for fees."

A report by the Tavoyan Women's Union about the Dawei Special Economic Zone noted the very limited access women have to information about developments in the community "Although there has been only little information provided to local communities about the project, our research indicates that women have had even less access to this information than men. Information was generally provided through public meetings, which women were not expected or encouraged to attend. During the project implementation period, when authorities summoned the locals to announce information about the project, it was usually only men who attended the meetings" (TWU, 2014).

One village leader thought that women did not belong to the leadership structure because, 'It just isn't the way it is.' The Gender Equality Network (GEN) notes, "From an historical point of view, the pervasiveness of the notion of women's traditionally high status, coupled with strict censorship laws, lack of nationwide sex disaggregated data...and limitations on civil society organizing, have left little room for public discussion, mobilization and action around issues negatively impacting on women's lives" (GEN, 2015). GEN also notes that the problem results both from a failure to notice gender inequality and the tendency to justify gender-based differences with cultural and religious arguments (ibid).

Conclusions

"In a few years, all fishing will be gone in this village. Every year there are less and less fishers. If they don't close down the big fishers there won't be any more fish to catch and there won't be any more small fishers left." (*Male fisher leader in Ye township*)

Small-scale fishing villages in Mon and Tanintharyi, already weakened by years of military rule, authoritarian projects and biased policies, are entering an era where they face major new threats to their existence amidst an unprecedented 'opening up' of the country. Men and women in these communities are being squeezed between national laws that do not adequately recognize their rights to access and control of the resources upon which they depend for their livelihoods and ways of life, and surging interest of powerful actors in capturing these same resources for exclusive purposes (e.g., extraction, conservation, tourism). In light of this and the fact that work on gender in small-scale fisheries remains in an introductory phase, the outlook for realizing the SSF Guidelines in Myanmar today may seem bleak.

The SSF Guidelines have an especially key role to play in Myanmar today in light of our findings. Rather than being dependent on 'waiting for the state' to implement them, they can be *used* as a "tool for investigation, reflection and action" (Franco & Monsalve 2017). This includes using these guidelines to prompt people to reflect critically on gender roles. Based on work in sub-Saharan Africa with communities facing varied resource grabs in varied political-legal contexts, Franco & Monsalve argue that, the VG Tenure and the SSF Guidelines are "built for use by anyone as a lens to (re)analyse, (re)assess

and (re)interpret the context, conditions and consequences of the resource grabs affecting peoples' lives" (ibid). A crucial point of departure is that, "the problem is *not* that people do not know when they are being exploited or oppressed, or when their interests and aspirations are being ignored or dismissed. Rather, the people most in need of information and analysis to help change an unjust situation through collective political action often have the least access" (ibid).

The workshop that launched the research for this article adopted this understanding of *using* the SSF Guidelines. Driven by local CSO-groups, the workshop facilitated discussions about the different issues faced by villagers in Mon and Tanintharyi. Relating the issues raised back to relevant provisions of the SSF Guidelines, it was possible to spark critical thinking and analysis about underlying drivers behind resource grabs they are facing and their differentiated impacts.³¹ Key provisions served to validate the participants in viewing the exploitation and oppression they are experiencing as injustice that deserved remedy, e.g. protection against eviction and infringement of rights (5.9), large-scale development projects (5.10) and protection in situation of armed conflicts (6.18).³² At the same time, this use of the SSF Guidelines also made possible analysis of gaps in current law and policy, and helped to frame formulation of advocacy, as well as strategizing about how to respond via "calculated collective action" (Franco & Monsalve, 2017), drawing on e.g. the restoration of access in cases of displacement from armed conflict (5.12), redistributive reform (5.8) and the need for inclusion of small-scale fishing communities in the design and implementation of conservation and climate change policies (5.15, 9.3).

This use of the guidelines needs to go hand in hand with better awareness and recognition of women's roles and principles of gender equity and equality, and we hope that this study has contributed here in a modest way as a start. This initial examination has begun to map and document entrenched gender roles in production and reproduction in SSF, gendered impacts in small-scale fisheries participation and access to resources, the marginalization of women from formal decision-making structures, and potentially new conflicts along gender-lines as Myanmar's political-economy is 'opened up'. It has begun to pull back the curtain on the pivotal role played by women in maintaining local and regional production, consumption and trade circuits. While for reasons already mentioned we were not able to trace in detail the markets and marketing of fish and fish-based products, the research has laid the foundations and relations for further investigation to go deeper in exploring this aspect of the story. To the extent that women in Myanmar occupy pivotal positions in the local and regional political economy, they necessarily have the potential to play a key role in fostering a truly sustainable small-scale fisheries economy. Promoting gender equality thus becomes strategic for the entire sector. Our work so far confirms the complementarity between the VG Tenure focusing on tenurial issues and the SSF Guidelines focusing on practice around small-scale fisheries. Using the SSF Guidelines on gender and small-scale fisheries in Myanmar points to the underlying, pressing issues of tenure insecurity that small-scale fishing communities are facing. More work based on this approach and with an explicit focus on gender that seeks to "break through the wall of silence and overcome obstacles to inclusive and democratic land and natural resource governance" is needed (Franco & Monsalve 2017).

³¹ Defined here following Borras et al. (2012, 850) as "essentially control-grabbing: grabbing the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control of resources". Borras, S.M.Jr., J. Franco, et al. 2012. Land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 39 (3-4), p. 845-872

³² All the bracketed numbers referencing key provisions in the SSF-guidelines

Good Practice

The SSF Guidelines are clear about the importance of ensuring an enabling environment and supporting use of the guidelines (Part 3), including promoting policy coherence with international human rights law and other international norms and instruments, as well as a whole host of other related policies, programs and initiatives at the national and subnational level. Promoting enabling conditions for a long-term vision based on agreed norms for sustainable small-scale fisheries and the eradication of hunger and poverty using an ecosystem approach (para.10.4) will be a difficult and ongoing challenge in the Myanmar context. This present study, as a first step with the partner communities and local organizations, has contributed (albeit modestly) toward this goal. The step was taken with the free prior informed consent of the participant communities; it followed prior work with the relevant local support CSOs and it anticipates continuing engagement with both sets of actors. The planning and preparation recognized small scale fishing communities “as holders, providers and receivers of knowledge” (para.11.4), particularly knowledge of their own “culture, traditions and practices around small-scale fishing” (para.11.6), and “especially the specific knowledge of women fishers and fish workers” (para.11.6). The study thus makes an initial, and thus very modest, contribution to the good practices of producing gender-disaggregated data and data making visible the “importance of small-scale fisheries and its different components including socio-economic aspects” (para. 11.1) and of “investigating and documenting traditional fisheries knowledge and technologies” (para.11.6). For TNI, the study is part of a series of founding steps that aim eventually to “support small-scale fishing communities, in particular to indigenous peoples, women and those relying on fishing for subsistence, including, as appropriate, the technical and financial assistance to organize, maintain, exchange and improve traditional knowledge of aquatic living resources and fishing techniques, and upgrade knowledge on aquatic ecosystems” (para. 11.7). All this is seen as part of laying the foundation for more ‘capacity development’ (section 12) type efforts in the future, especially, efforts to “enhance the capacity of small-scale fishing communities in order to enable them to participate in decision-making processes” and especially towards the “equitable participation of women in such structures” (para. 12.1). The idea of research was introduced during a large partners’ conference on the SSF Guidelines, and discussed as part of the actors’ own organizing around the use and applications of the VG Tenure and SSF Guidelines in their networks and communities. The research process draws from existing knowledge and experience of action research on bringing the Voluntary Tenure Guidelines to rural communities and how, together with them, to use the VGs to strengthen tenure of land and fisheries.³³

With regard to process, there were transparent discussions about the process and hoped for outcomes, and partners themselves chose the areas to be covered, and how they wanted to participate. Participatory validation workshops after writing the first draft was part of the design, enabling an environment where community members could reflect on, change and validate initial research findings. The research also involved transforming the researchers themselves – who had come from different technical and research backgrounds – in an iterative and reflective process on the aspects of small-scale fisheries and the gender dynamics in communities. There was a debriefing and reflection post-field work to gather lessons learned from the data gathering and organizing work and continuing partnerships post research. This process thus contributes to opening up more possibilities for creating synergies for the implementation of both the VG Tenure and SSF Guidelines in Myanmar.

³³ See <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/building-bottom-up-accountability-in-an-era-of-land-grabbing-in-sub-saharan-africa>

The initiative has raised additional questions that need to be answered, since the world of gender and fisheries covers a wide range of knowledge areas, and for this reason, it is best understood as part of an ongoing collaboration with the partners and communities to address the challenge of achieving gender equality. Achieving gender equality involves the dismantling of stereotypes that bind people to certain choices, opportunities, roles, lifestyles, behaviours. Dismantling these stereotypes for women and men serves to help them reach their full potential. Gender equality releases men from rigid and debilitating stereotypes that bind them to being 'masculine', breadwinners, providers of material needs of their family, willing to engage in dangerous livelihoods, unwilling to seek emotional, medical or physical support. It releases women from rigid and debilitating 'feminine' stereotypes of being timid, nurturing and careful, that limits them to roles of care giving at home, voiceless outside of the home, vulnerable to domestic violence and limited in life choices. Increasing the level of men's participation at home increases satisfaction with home life while increasing the level of women's participation in community leadership increases confidence, opportunities and community benefits.

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