

THE CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN THE BLUE ECONOMY

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Abstract: *There are four major challenges that women face in the Blue Economy: Structural - Big companies don't reach the small scale fisheries, where women usually work. Despite the fact that women provide more than 85% of the landed catch, even when investment is available it reaches men first. Sociocultural - Social attitudes frown on and punish women for being in certain spaces. Discriminatory gender and social stereotypes ban women from taking part in areas of the Blue Economy. Capacity - Women engaged in the Blue Economy lack access to capital, investments, and equipment to grow their businesses. Lack of women's voices - Women's voices are absent in their majority.*

Key words: *blue economy, gender equality, women's empowerment*

Introduction

This paper presents an overview of challenges women face in gender equality and women's empowerment issues in the fisheries sector. Women's engagement in fisheries can be viewed from social, political and technical perspectives, all of which show that the role of women is often underestimated. This inadequate recognition of women's contributions hampers the sustainable development process, resulting in increased poverty and food insecurity. This paper provides information on policy, institutions and planning processes; statistical dimensions in gender analysis; and specific concerns in the field of fisheries industries. It identifies lessons learned and opportunities for gender mainstreaming at macro, meso and microoperational levels.

In the fisheries sector, men and women engage in distinct and often complementary activities that are strongly influenced by the social, cultural and economic contexts they live in. Male-female relations vary greatly and are based on economic status, power relations, and access to productive resources and services. In most regions, fish catching is male-dominated. Ocean-going boats for offshore and deep-sea fishing have male crews, while in coastal artisanal fishing communities women often manage smaller boats and canoes. Women are mostly responsible for skilled and time-consuming onshore tasks, such as making and mending nets, processing and marketing catches, and providing services to the boats. In western Africa and Asia, as much as 60 percent of seafood is marketed by women, and in many parts of the world they also do a significant amount of shellfish gathering/clam gleaning – a fishery activity that is often under-recognized, or not recognized at all.

Sectoral statistical systems (such as those for fisheries) commonly fail to capture these broader contributions to livelihoods, nor do they consider women's engagement in fishery/shellfish harvesting activities (as the products are often not sold through a formal market system, may not be of high value, or may be used for home consumption). In addition, women may not self-report/identify as being „fishers” even though they are

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engaged in these activities. In fisheries value chains men and women have distinct roles, and their socio-economic status influences their power relations. Women and men can have dominant roles, or they can be in positions of high dependency. Women constitute about half the population involved in fisheries development activities. In some developing regions women have become important fish entrepreneurs who control significant amounts of money, finance a variety of fish-based enterprises, and generate substantial returns for households and communities.

Worldwide, the fisheries and aquaculture sector provides direct employment and revenue to an estimated 180 million or more people. In certain countries of West Africa (i.e. Ghana, the Niger, Benin and the Gambia), women are traditionally engaged in low-paid jobs, such as unloading the day's catch to be carried to the beach or fish-smoking huts; drying and processing the fish; and converting fish waste into useful products. Compared with men, women often face more problems related to technology, finance for enterprise expansion, and transport. Their plight is worsened at the market level where they encounter price fluctuations for their products, or where social and/or cultural pressures limit their market opportunities to locations that are close to home. If women are able to access local markets, they may still be unable to access the national or global markets that men have access to. They often assume responsibility for their families' daily subsistence needs, which sometimes drastically depletes their working capital. In the inland fisheries of many countries women are engaged in fishing and are taking a leading role in the rapid growth of aquaculture. They own and manage fishing boats and have their own fishing gear.

In aquaculture, women often carry out most of the work of feeding, harvesting and processing fish and shellfish. They can become managers of small household enterprises, such as fish ponds, and thus improve their families' income and nutrition. However, women tend to have limited control over ponds and inputs for aquaculture, so they rarely participate in production beyond satisfying their household needs. When aquaculture production intensifies, it increases the labour burdens on women and youth, affecting their production, productivity and welfare. As most fisheries activities are seasonal and influenced by the status of the resources, many fishing communities have diversified their livelihoods. Depending on the status of their household, women and men engage in other economic activities such as vegetable gardening or farming to augment their family incomes, as is seen in Benin, Cambodia, the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria and Thailand.

Until the 1980s, most investment in the fisheries sector was directed at large-scale and industrial production, particularly in coastal fisheries. Limited funds were allocated to small-scale fisheries, with little attention given to social issues. As fish stocks declined, development efforts focused on increasing investment in aquaculture, making changes in the trade system, and developing innovative institutional arrangements for fisheries management, with a new focus on social issues in fisheries. Poverty reduction, gender equality and livelihood approaches entered the sector's development agenda and began to influence fisheries planning.

Almost universally, women play key roles in the fishery industry and in household livelihoods and nutrition. These women, estimated at approximately 90 million, are often invisible to policy-makers who have traditionally assumed – mistakenly – that fisheries are largely a male domain. Many studies indicate that millions of rural men and women engage in subsistence fishing on a seasonal or occasional basis, especially in inland fisheries in Asia and Africa, but are not recorded as „fishers” in official statistics due to engagement in other activities, which may be more economically productive, or a reluctance to self-report as fishers.

The fisheries sector is mainly documented through statistics on capture and aquaculture, where the quality of sex-disaggregated data has been low and the reporting frequency variable. Policies and development plans obscure the economic contribution of the pre- and post-harvest subsectors, where women are most active. In addition, reported statistics largely fail to capture youth and children employed in the sector, and the limited data available are rarely sex-disaggregated. Gender issues in the fisheries sector are seldom examined, and women's important role is often not adequately considered. By failing to address gender-specific constraints on improving production and productivity, policies have often resulted in massive losses to the sector in terms of production and income, household food security and nutrition, particularly for the poor.

How can we promote gender equality and empower women in the fisheries sector?

Both women and men must be accorded equal rights and be able to participate in the development process, in order to ensure that their interests and needs are adequately protected and fulfilled. International human rights law recognizes equal rights, yet women remain marginalized, while their workloads and responsibilities have increased. In view of their important role in the post-harvest subsector, women must be allowed to participate in decision-making processes, and be provided with the access to physical and capital resources for developing their industry and meeting their needs and aspirations. It is necessary to provide them with training and formal education to improve the efficiency, profitability and sustainability of their activities; to ensure adequate infrastructure, equipment, technologies, and access to markets. This will support their enterprises, increase their income potential and reduce their marginalization. However, there is always the risk of elite capture (by men) of new income-generating opportunities for women. For example, as seen in the development of the mussel culture industry in India (which was once traditionally carried out by women), once the activity became profitable men began to engage in culturing as well, and women were driven out of the industry.

It is also urgent to give women equal control in the value chain and profit margins. This is particularly relevant as women often still work in low-status, less-skilled and low-paid jobs, and on informal, casual and temporary contracts that disqualify them from receiving social benefits. A study on women clam collectors in Tunisia has shown that they earn very little due to their weak bargaining power within a larger system characterized by intermediaries, unfair transport fees, lack of interest by officials and policy-makers, and limited access to training and extension. To overcome this, more efforts are needed to include women in the most profitable markets and enterprises, and to provide them with more employment opportunities in fish processing factories. In this way, they may profit from increasing market globalization and become less vulnerable to decreases in fish catches and poor services.

The picture is very complex, however, as the value chain is shaped by the interplay between male and female stakeholders' complementary activities, which influence each other's efficiency and the final value added. Men often have greater access and connections to national and even global value chains and greater bargaining power over intermediaries; while women sell fish at the retail level, mainly in local markets, where intermediaries tend to control the demand. To improve their positions in the value chain, female traders must be provided with the know-how and access to education and information on fish preservation and marketing so they can receive better quality fish and keep it fresh. The increasing globalization of markets has negative consequences (i.e. loss of income) for small fish traders, mostly women. For example, in Benin, the Gambia and Niger, women-owned



enterprises are small and grow slowly, as funds are used to meet household expenses rather than to expand the business.

There is an urgent need to overcome sociocultural norms and values, and political and economic factors that suppress or marginalize women's rights, privileges and opportunities, so that they can participate more effectively and equally in the sustainable development of their communities. The increasing demand for fish and fisheries resources is leading to overexploitation, and there is a need to better utilize present global catches while reducing waste and losses. Therefore fisheries strategies should take gender-specific divisions of labour into account. To avoid placing additional time burdens on women and to promote broad social and cultural acceptability, the opportunities offered by aquaculture should be assessed from a gender perspective, using a participatory approach. Strategies must ensure that aquaculture can contribute to women's empowerment. To achieve a sustainable impact on the social and economic outcomes of communities, it is important that men and women equally benefit from any fishing project and from technical and financial inputs, such as boats, fridges, educational materials, technical instruments and credit.

According to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goal 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"), the integration of a gender perspective into fisheries and aquaculture management and development also contributes to eradicating poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality, and empowering women. Gender-responsive interventions help meet these changes in policy, markets and technology.

Gender in fisheries policies, institutions and planning processes

Traditionally, institutions responsible for fishing resources have worked with and for men. Their policies have tended to concentrate on the harvesting sector, where men dominate. Fishing development programmes have focused on men's needs and priorities, ignoring the different impacts of policies and programmes on each population category and paying little attention to the important role of women in the sector. The situation is now changing as new institutional settings for participatory management evolve – although women are still often excluded from planning mainstream fisheries activities, and many countries still have gender-blind fisheries policies. To ensure sustainable and equitable policy impacts it is essential to identify and target the needs and interests of both women and men. In the past, development policies in the small-scale fisheries sector targeted women as fish processors, providing them with inputs such as ovens and credit. But in policy-making, the implications of women's social status (in relation to men) for achieving positive and sustainable change were not adequately examined, although the repercussions for the social and economic outcomes of such policies are significant. Policy initiatives mainly support larger or urban traders rather than enabling those already working in the sector to take advantage of these changes. Additional efforts are needed to develop strategies that promote more diversified and independent roles for women – such as strengthened unions and organizations, resource allocation mechanisms and increased access to credit – and to formulate and implement fisheries policies and initiatives that adequately address women's interests and priorities.

This requires overcoming the weak political commitment to mainstreaming gender into the development agenda by supporting and monitoring equity, promoting women's empowerment, and providing adequate information and evidence for proper decision-making and policy-making. Women must also be adequately represented in fisheries sector decision-making and in leadership positions. Men and women should enjoy equal opportunities in decision-making processes and in non-traditional activities and

organizations. Research frequently focuses on capture, but must also adequately consider other fish users involved in pre- and post-fishing operations. It is essential to consider the livelihood interests of all stakeholders throughout the value chain when addressing resource management. New institutional arrangements are needed for the equal participation of capture and post-harvest actors in decision-making. Protection measures and gender-specific budget allocations are also necessary to promote women's capabilities, empowerment and social advancement in fisheries and aquaculture. Categories of male actors who are equally disadvantaged by power relations in the sector should also be targeted.

Statistics and gender profiles

The information available to decision-makers is still limited, and research and statistics are seldom disaggregated by sex; what's more, these focus on the male-dominated fish catching sector rather than fish processing and marketing, where women are more active. To overcome this constraint, gender (and poverty) profiles are required to assess the gender implications of changes in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. Detailed intra-household information is needed to analyse the different impacts, risks and gains on men's and women's livelihoods. The complex relationships at household and community levels between men and women as boat owners, processors and sellers, and their access to productive resources and decision-making mechanisms, must be adequately analysed so that appropriate actions can be taken to reduce the vulnerability of the most affected population categories.

In Latin America, about 95 percent of fisheries are industrial, and a large proportion of products are processed and packaged in factories. Studies of factory employment in this region reveal that men and women receive equal payment for the same tasks, but women occupy very few of the higher-paid positions. Most of their work involves receiving, cleaning, filleting, classifying and packing the fish. In resource management, the livelihood interests of all stakeholders involved throughout the whole value chain should be considered. Studies carried out in Bangladesh, Kenya, Sri Lanka and in some Latin American countries show that women participating in the growing seafood export processing industry, where they are required to stay away from home for long periods, face difficulties in developing other aspects of their lives. They often experience poorer working conditions and lower wages than men. Women are given irregular and short-term work, frequently with no health, safety or other protection benefits. Adopting a gender lens in the formulation of industrial fisheries policy would allow these underlying gender inequalities to be addressed. The bulk purchasing of fish, the opening up of new markets for fishmeal and fish oil, and the growth of large wholesale trade are increasing the competition between local fish traders and external buyers. This often has negative social impacts on local fishing communities, where minimal access to capital, inputs, supplies and advisory services constrains their ability to establish and maintain a reliable supply of high-quality produce, creating difficulties for entry into international markets.

Women's poor access to resources in fisheries can also increase their vulnerability in terms of health. Some studies in sub-Saharan Africa report rises in the incidence of HIV/AIDS for a number of reasons, including fish-for-sex practices between male fishers and local female buyers seeking access to fish. This is linked to the increased competition for fish and the resulting new power relations between existing players. Women's participation as equal and productive partners in fisheries has significant impacts on household nutrition and living standards. Fisheries and aquaculture projects must analyse all these socioeconomic factors, along with the existing relationships, and recommend



actions aimed at gender equality and increasing women's participation as active agents for change in the sector. The Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute has provided women traders with mobile phones for fish marketing so they can negotiate with brokers. In many European countries, women have attained positions at the policy level, and are promoting important legal innovations that recognize their role in productive activities related to fisheries.

Fieldwork suggests that meso level organizations that guide co-management processes can play an important role in advocating for gender-responsive regulatory systems that contribute to gender equality. Several country-level initiatives have been undertaken by institutions to promote gender equality at a national level. The Vietnamese Women in Fisheries Network and the Committee for the Advancement of Women in Fisheries have set up a gender database and developed a gender action plan for empowering women through capacity development. Network recognizes women's important role in fisheries management and production. In Chad, clusters have been established to manage community technology platforms for improving fish preservation and processing and reducing the negative outcomes of globalization on small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. During the formulation of development projects and programmes for coastal zones, analysing gender issues to assess the impacts of any activity on the relationships between men and women at household and community levels contributes to promoting gender equality and sustainable development. Quantitative and qualitative gender-sensitive indicators can be formulated and monitored within the fishing communities, to see how well the projects satisfy the practical and strategic needs of men and women and what can be done to reduce existing gender gaps.

The way forward

Human dimensions must be considered in all formal fisheries regulations, policies and plans, and the gender perspective must be included in fisheries activities and development strategies. This requires proper organization and involvement of women and men in identifying their needs and aspirations and in searching for solutions. As in other sectors, women's empowerment in fisheries requires an examination of their means of production, gender relationships, and how to create equalities in their access to resources, services and employment opportunities. New institutional arrangements are being created as climate change, resource depletion, aquaculture development and global trade shape and re-shape the fisheries sector. These must ensure new opportunities for equitable resource access rights, access to markets, benefits from aquaculture and codes of conduct in the industry, especially for the most marginalized and poorest categories of men and women. Future research is required to better understand women's and men's roles and relationships in the fisheries sector and to promote more sustainable and equitable fisheries development. Even after two decades of highlighting women's roles in fisheries, comprehensive and accurate sex-disaggregated statistics are lacking, and this gap must be filled as the first step in gender mainstreaming at the policy level.

The following are efforts to be undertaken at the the macro, meso and micro-levels to achieve gender equality in fisheries:

At the macro level

Legal frameworks

- Collect accurate sex-disaggregated statistics to inform policies and overcome the effects of gender-blind policies by analysing the gender relations and the livelihood strategies of men and women when planning fishing techniques and fish processing and

when managing fisheries resources. Special efforts are needed at the policy level to ensure that women and men fishers have equal access to productive resources and services, and equal participation in research and planning activities. This also requires that adequate implementation mechanisms and budget allocation be in place to support good governance.

- Encourage the enactment of gender-responsive laws when necessary and according to Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which allows States Parties to adopt temporary special measures for as long as inequalities continue to exist and until equal status has been achieved.
- Promote and support the implementation of CEDAW Article 14, which requires states to take into account the specific problems faced by rural women and ensure that they participate in and fully benefit from agriculture and rural development.
- Implement CEDAW General Recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women, which calls for establishing enabling institutional, legal and policy frameworks to ensure that fisheries policies are gender-responsive and adequately budgeted.

Enabling environment

- Promote mutually beneficial partnerships between buyers (supermarkets) and small producers, and protect all partners involved (for example through insurance programmes to reduce risks).

Gender awareness

- Provide gender training, and sensitize policy- and decision-makers on gender issues.

Equitable access and control

- Ensure that women and men have access to know-how, information (especially for the aquaculture sector), productive resources, services and institutions.

Management initiatives

- Implement management strategies in the fishing areas used by women, such as mangroves, sand flats and lagoons, and assist them in identifying species and assessing how changes affect them.
- Provide incentives for companies to increase their sales and profits from ethical trade, and to promote corporate social responsibility. Community management and co-management groups (e.g. resource management groups) can provide a framework for livelihood improvements at community, household and individual levels and also for stakeholders' (women's) involvement.

At the meso/institutional level

Organizational support and networking

- Strengthen existing self-help groups and assist the formation and operation of support groups.
- Encourage women's participation in national and regional networks of community management practitioners, to promote the exchange of information and lessons learned and to give them a voice in changing the fisheries sector.
- Introduce incentives to support women's cooperatives, communal banks (for fish marketing), and gender-sensitive local institutions.

Social protection investments

- Design gender-sensitive social protection initiatives to address specific vulnerabilities, capacities and aspirations of both women and men.
- Support women's entry into new markets and profitable enterprises/ businesses, through tailor-made and affordable financial services.
- Raise awareness about the dangers of fish-for-sex transactions and identify other sources of income for vulnerable women and men.
- Develop gender-responsive regulatory mechanisms for fishery factories to enhance the value of women's labour.
- Promote and extend coverage of social security measures to women fishworkers.



Decision-making bodies

• Provide social and communal support for women's participation in activities and decision-making processes aimed at community development. • Invest in women's negotiation and leadership skills to build their self-esteem and self-confidence for participating in decision-making and negotiation processes.

Research and development

• Improve the gender balance in the fisheries sector by identifying and addressing gender-related needs in fisheries management. • Document the traditional knowledge, institutions and skills of men and women in the sector, assessing customary management systems, fishing trends and seafood consumption patterns in rural coastal communities. • Collect and disseminate sex-disaggregated data and develop gender-sensitive indicators for project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. • Create an inventory of targeted species and distribution patterns at the local level; analyse the main factors that affect fish abundance and distribution, and ways of addressing the specific problems faced by men and women. Gender-responsive fishing projects and programmes • Plan and implement gender-responsive projects that take into account the specific constraints faced by women and men, their productive and economic activities and education levels, and the sociocultural context. • Let women participate in the formulation of management plans and activities designed for their empowerment. • Encourage women's participation as project and extension staff, in recognition of their technical capacity.

At the micro/community level (with cross-sectoral linkages)

Education

• Provide men and women with access to formal and informal education in improved technologies, bookkeeping, entrepreneurial skills, health practices, sanitation and nutrition, adult literacy, and training and extension services. • Train women in the sustainable management of fishing resources (e.g. as guides in tourist areas) and in non-traditional female activities. Training could also cover topics such as gender-based violence and reproductive health.

Infrastructure improvements

• Introduce improved technologies, facilities and methods to ease women's work burdens and increase their efficiency, such as improved road and market infrastructure to shorten travel time and transaction periods, thus assisting them in the marketing and distribution of fishery products.

Income-generating opportunities

• Identify new income-generating opportunities in the communities, including non-fisheries activities, and provide technical and financial services for household, social and economic activities. • Tailor new microfinance services and credit facilities to the needs of different clients, such as women who lack collateral and stable employment. • Design projects to support women's work within their households (e.g. by providing water and wood supplies or labour-saving techniques) and to help the rural poor with no land rights (e.g. by providing ponds on government land).

Freeing up women's time

• Provide labour-saving technologies for domestic and fisheries work (i.e. ovens for fish processing, and more efficient processing and storage equipment); provide better infrastructure (electricity, refrigeration, running water, etc.) and services (transportation, health, extension, credit, child care arrangements at fish processing factories); and promote more equitable sharing of work between men and women, in order to free up women's time for taking advantage of new opportunities and for girls to attend school.

Why are gender issues in fisheries important?

There are good reasons why effective and efficient development of fisheries must take the roles of both women and men in the sector into account, including the obvious concerns about fairness, equal opportunity and discrimination:

- Women make up an important part of the fishing sector, particularly in small-scale fisheries, and increasingly in capture fishing and other activities. By acknowledging the role they play, better management and development strategies and interventions can be developed that address all of the activities in the sector, not just those carried out by men.

- Women make significant contributions to fishery-related activities other than fishing. They play the major role in processing fish and fishery products, as well as in marketing. Although these roles are often very different to those of men, they are integral parts of the industry. Ignoring these activities means ignoring a large portion of the sector.

- The different work done by women generates different kinds of knowledge. For example, while men may know which grounds have the best fishing, women know the price these fish will fetch in the market. Only with an understanding of both women's and men's experiences and expertise can we understand the fishery sector in its entirety, and manage its development appropriately.

- The under-representation of women in decision-making limits the use of their expertise and knowledge.

- The number of women holding managerial posts with decisionmaking powers is very low. Many women in fisheries have low selfesteem, possibly reflecting social values in those settings that hold men to be superior. This reduces women's involvement and limits the ability for women to be empowered and contribute to the fullest of their capacity.

- Women don't usually participate in meetings held by fishermen's organisations. Most fishing projects are male-oriented, and women's participation is limited with respect to planning, programming and management. As a result, consideration of women's knowledge and needs is limited, which ultimately limits the effectiveness of such plans and programmes, etc.

- There are very few policies or programmes within the fishing sector where gender aspects are considered, resulting in excluding a significant portion of the fishing community from programmes development and assistance and equal opportunities.

Recommendations

Policies and programmes must meet the needs of women in the fisheries sector, recognise and value the role they play, and empower women at all decision-making levels. This could be achieved through:

- Increasing awareness of gender issues and ensuring that approaches improve the quality of life for women in fisheries. Gathering information and developing research programmes that systematically tackle gender issues and women's participation and integration in fisheries development.

- Recognising the important role that women play in guaranteeing household food security and well-being.

- Developing marketing by providing further support in different areas such as improving women's access to markets and storage of fish. Although we must be aware that successful projects may increase male migration into an area, to the detriment of women fishers.

- Facilitating access to fish resources. Rights, access and control of resources are central to successful fisheries development. However, women's entitlements are frequently ignored. This situation must be addressed explicitly in order for the full potential of



women's contributions to be realised. Women must also have a role in the management of resources.

- Encouraging the participation of women and women's groups in decision-making processes at both community level (by strengthening women's organisations) and government level.

- Providing appropriate training, designed to target women in fisheries. It's important to ensure that training is accessible to women so that they can improve their productivity and the quality of their products. Courses should be structured and held in places that won't conflict with women's other responsibilities.

- Implementing a 'gender and development' (GAD) approach rather than a 'women and development' (WAD) approach. A GAD approach focuses on the roles and socially constructed expectations of both women and men and encourages finding ways to challenge and change them. Women's producer groups and collective structures have succeeded in some interventions to access greater benefits for women and address gender inequities. But in other cases, projects that are mainly women-centred can be perceived by men as a threat, which can lead to the failure of the project. Programmes focused on increasing women's participation in fisheries management also often lacked an evaluation of their success.

Conclusion

Despite women's significant role in fisheries, there's a lack of attention to gender roles. This can result in policies or programmes failing to improve livelihoods or reduce vulnerability among fishing communities. Addressing the largely 'invisible' role of women in small-scale fisheries will increase the chances that actions aimed at improving the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and their families are successful. Fishing households often have clearly defined gender roles and responsibilities. This results in different income streams within households. Women who buy fish for processing and marketing may have to compete with others to obtain fish, even from their male relatives. These complex arrangements and gender relations need to be considered when planning development interventions. Doing so can avoid women being further marginalised and avoid creating an environment that makes the women more vulnerable.

Rural women play a critical but often undervalued role in fishing-reliant families and communities. Their direct activities include collecting, processing, preparing and marketing of fish and other marine resources. They also have an indirect influence through household management in accounting for how many fish are supplied to the household. Pivotaly, women also have the main responsibility for educating young children about food collection, preparation and management. This extends to passing on their knowledge on resource use and traditional management. While women may bear the brunt of the costs of gender differences and inequality within society, the impact of this is felt widely. Women are the main family caregivers, so negative impacts on them will result in persistent poverty for all members of the society.

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