

5.1 Addressing gender equity and wellbeing in culture-based fisheries communities in Sri Lanka

Nireka Weeratunge

International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka RA

RAC Kanchana

Department of Geography, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Gayani P Paranamana

Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Mohottala G Kularatne

Department of Economic, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Inland fisheries, of which culture-based fisheries (CBF) is a sub-sector, provide valuable aquatic products, important for sustaining rural livelihoods and food security. Women's engagement in inland fisheries value chains is estimated to be higher than in marine fisheries value chains globally, as well as in Asia. Within the context of gender issues in inland fisheries in Asia and a macro-level assessment of gender inequality in Sri Lanka, this paper focuses on addressing gender equity and wellbeing in CBF communities in Sri Lanka. The conceptual approaches of social relations, gender inclusive value chains analysis and social wellbeing are combined to explore gender roles and relations within the livelihood system of reservoir communities, the extent of participation of women in fishing-related activities and in fisheries governance, the gendered location and benefits of participating in CBF value chains, as well as wellbeing perceptions that underlie the motivations and outcomes of CBF livelihoods in Sri Lanka. This paper is based on a literature review, as well as primary data from fieldwork by Kanchana and Paranamana in 9 reservoir-based CBF communities, located in 5 districts in Sri Lanka. Qualitative methods, centred on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), were used by the researchers. The analysis reveals the predominant engagement of men in CBF value chains of finfish and giant freshwater prawn (GFP). Women are mostly confined to several nodes, such as dried fish processing and retailing in the finfish chain, and primary handling in the GFP chain – activities with low economic returns. In addressing gender equity and wellbeing within the CBF sector in Sri Lanka, we argue for a transformative approach that focuses on translating policy into action, as well as changes in institutional systems and gender norms to ensure higher returns to women through a participatory, consultative process.

Introduction

Global inland fisheries production, of which CBF is a sub-sector, was estimated to be around 1.3 mt annually (FAO 2024) with its economic value estimated at around USD26 billion (Funge-Smith 2018). An estimated 16.8–20.7 million people were engaged in harvesting in inland fisheries, with a ratio of 1 female fisher to 7.3 male fishers (Funge-Smith 2018). A further 8–38 million people were estimated to be employed in post-harvesting activities (processing and trading) in inland fisheries, of which 54% were estimated to be women (Funge-Smith 2018). As pointed out by Kusakabe (2003), it appears that women are not only involved in post-harvesting but also harvesting in inland fisheries in Asia, to a greater extent than in marine fisheries. In Southeast Asia, women are involved in gleaning or fishing in paddy/fish/shrimp pond systems, lakes and wetlands (Kusakabe 2003). Case studies from Kerala, India reveal that women accompany husbands on fishing trips to lakes and estuaries (Gopal et al. 2022). While women constitute a large proportion in post-harvesting activities in inland fisheries globally and in Asia, they tend to engage in small-scale processing and trading of fish varieties important to poor people's diets/food security, while men engage in larger-scale trading of high-value, export-oriented products with larger profit margins (Kusakabe 2003).

However, gender roles are not rigid as they can change with economic and environmental changes (Kusakabe 2003; Gopal et al. 2022). Women can get more involved in fisheries if water bodies expand – for example, dam construction in the Mekong, or when returns from agriculture decline. If climate change has negative impacts on agriculture (for example, the inundation of fields or unexpected

weather patterns), larger numbers of both women and men can move into fisheries. Conversely, climate change can also change fish availability in different locations; decline in fish catches can result in men or women moving out of fisheries-related livelihoods. As gender roles are different, women and men have different knowledge, experience and skills in relation to fisheries within their sociocultural contexts (Kusakabe 2003). Moreover, households are not necessarily monolithic: complementary roles, as well as conflictual interests and needs exist among household members (Kusakabe 2003), thus leading male and female members to negotiate trade-offs in their roles and interests. Constraints to women's involvement in inland fisheries include gender norms, family care needs, limited mobility and limited access to loans (Funge-Smith 2018). Benefits from women's engagement in inland fisheries range from a larger contribution to household income, access to small nutritious fish in household diets and flexibility in dealing with climate change, when it might affect agriculture or fisheries differently (Funge-Smith 2018).

The rationale for gender equity in CBF is based on an analysis that applies to the small-scale fisheries and aquaculture sector in general (Weeratunge et al. 2010). First, while both men and women are employed in the fisheries/aquaculture sector, women's work is often invisible, unrewarded and underestimated. Most fisheries and aquaculture development projects have targeted men as their primary beneficiaries. Second, labour productivity in these sectors remains low if women do not receive sufficient returns on their work. Gender disparities in fisheries can result in lower labour productivity within the sector and inefficient allocation of labour at household and national levels. Customary beliefs, norms, practices and



laws, and/or unfavourable regulatory structures of the state, reduce women's access to fisheries resources, assets and decision-making (FAO 2006; Porter 2006; Okali and Holvoet 2007), confining them to the lower end of supply chains, receiving lower returns, within a pervasive 'informal' sector in many developing countries. Third, aside from the economic rationale for gender inclusion, the violation of women's rights for social equality in the fisheries and aquaculture sector undermines the wellbeing of women, from a rights-based perspective. Women and men often have different access and tenure rights to water and land resources. Even when women use aquatic resources, they are often excluded from fisheries governance and rarely consulted in attempts to manage these resources. Fourth, the wellbeing of the entire fishing household and thereby society in general increases if inequalities between women and men are addressed. Even though women bear the brunt of the costs of gender inequities, these costs are distributed widely and are a cause of persistent poverty for all members of the society. Improving women's incomes and educational levels, as well as their access to information and decision-making processes, enhances human capabilities of the household, as well as society in general. Smith and Haddad (2000) found that women's education level and status within the household was the single most important factor for reducing child malnutrition in the world.

Development of CBF is considered as an environment friendly fisheries enhancement approach to utilising 12,000–15,000 inland reservoirs covering an estimated 206,000 ha in Sri Lanka for increasing fish production and food security (Wijenayake et al. 2021). In this paper, we address issues of gender equity

and wellbeing in CBF communities in Sri Lanka, within the overall small-scale inland fisheries context outlined above and based on the gender analysis emerging from the data of social science studies, conducted by Kanchana et al. (2025) and Paranamana et al. (2025) within the ACIAR project 'Improved productivity, efficiency and sustainability of the CBF for finfish and GFP in Sri Lanka'. Our conceptual approach incorporates the social relations perspective (Kabeer 1994; 1999), gender-inclusive value chain analysis (Mayoux and Mackie 2008; AgriProFocus 2012) and the social wellbeing perspective (McGregor 2008; White 2008). These perspectives are combined to understand the different roles and relations of women and men in fisheries production and value addition within CBF communities, gender gaps in benefits and costs accrued within CBF value chains, disparities in decision-making and governance, as well as differences in wellbeing outcomes from engaging in CBF. We hope this analysis will contribute fresh insights and address prevailing knowledge gaps on gendered engagement, decision-making and wellbeing within the small-scale fisheries literature in general, and the CBF literature in particular.

Conceptual approach

A range of gender and development (GAD) approaches/frameworks (March et al. 1999; Warren 2007) were developed since the 1980s to analyse and address inequities in women's and men's roles in economic and social development. While each of these frameworks has their strengths and weaknesses, the holistic social relations approach (Kabeer 1994; 1999), centred on gender relations between women and men, and combining equality with human wellbeing factors, has been used in this paper. This perspective focuses on

analysing gender norms and practices that shape activities of women and men, their access to resources, their agency and how power is negotiated within gender relations. As defined by Kabeer (1999, p 11), gender relations are social relations between women and men constituted of underlying 'rules, norms and practices by which resources are allocated, tasks and responsibilities are assigned, value is given and power is mobilised'. Gender relations intersect with other social relations, based on categories, such as class, race, ethnicity and religion, or what is conceptualised as intersectionality in current discourse. Within Kabeer's (1999) approach, gender relations operate within 4 interrelated institutions – family, community, market and state. Agency of women and men is a core concept in this approach and is delineated as an ability to make decisions, to define goals and act upon them (Kabeer 1999). Agency is enabled or constrained within the interrelated institutional framework and is critical to achieving wellbeing, empowerment and equality.

The social relations approach is useful to analyse the roles and relations within the gender division of labour in CBF communities, based on underlying norms and practices, which shape decision-making and engagement in livelihood activities, such as input purchasing, fishing/gleaning, processing and trading by household members. Moreover, the negotiation of power relations between women and men can also be assessed by looking at membership and decision-making in fisheries and other community organisations, bargaining power with suppliers and buyers, communication with fisheries/aquaculture extension officers, as well as the extent of their voices being taken into account in fisheries policies.

The social relations approach is combined here with gendered/gender inclusive value chain analysis (Mayoux and Mackie 2008; AgriProFocus 2012) to assess nodes where women and men are located, and relative benefits and costs to women and men of engaging in CBF value chains. Value chains are networks of actors whose activities enable the production and distribution of goods or services to consumers. In the case of fisheries value chains, actors use assets to transform inputs into goods or services (outputs), along 'upstream' (fishing), 'midstream' (processing, collecting, wholesaling) and 'downstream' (retailing) segments (Belton 2015). The term 'value chain' refers to the fact that value is added to preliminary products through the combination of other resources (ILO 2006).

Mayoux and Mackie (2008) have argued that gender analysis is often the 'weakest point' in most value-chain analyses and commonly disregarded in value-chain manuals. When included it is often incorporated as a separate activity that provides livelihood context, rather than being integral to the value-chain analysis process. They emphasise that identifying gender inequalities can be crucial to understanding the 'weakest links' within value chains to enable upgrading of these chains (Mayoux and Mackie 2008). Incorporating gender inclusive value-chain analysis helps to assess the gendered benefits and costs of small-scale fishers, fish processors and traders in being linked to market processes or being excluded from these processes; to explain why particular value chains are dominated by men or women; to identify circumstances where women have been able to participate successfully in value chains; and to assess how women can be supported to make a more effective economic contribution (Mayoux and Mackie 2008; AgriProFocus 2012).



The third conceptual orientation used in this analysis is the social wellbeing approach (McGregor 2008; White 2008), focused on what a person considers a 'good life' to be and what livelihood strategies s/he would pursue to achieve this 'good life'. This approach is actor-centred and considers the dynamics of change from the perspective of affected individuals and groups. Wellbeing within this perspective is both a process (pursuit) and an outcome (achievement) (Weeratunge et al. 2014). Social wellbeing is defined as: 'A state of being with others and the natural environment that arises where human needs are met, where individuals and groups can act meaningfully to pursue their goals, and where they are satisfied with their way of life' (Armitage et al. 2012, p 14). The social wellbeing approach is also known as the 3D wellbeing approach (White 2008) as it assesses wellbeing in terms of 3 interrelated dimensions – material, relational and subjective.

The material dimension of social wellbeing focuses on what resources (including the environment) to which a person has access and the extent to which the needs of the person are met. This includes livelihoods, income, assets, natural resource stocks, food, water, air quality, waste disposal, health, and bio-geo physical processes. The relational dimension considers the social relationships in which a person engages to pursue or achieve wellbeing. This includes relations with nature and other human beings, such as relations with animals and plants, access to and tenure of natural resources/land/coast/sea/reservoir, intra- and inter-household relations, gender and ethnic relations, community and extra-local relations which give access to resources and markets and shape behaviour through institutions/social structures. The subjective dimension takes

account of a person's skills and knowledge, feelings, level of satisfaction and sense of security with the quality or way of life he or she pursues or achieves. It includes feelings of autonomy, freedom, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, sadness, happiness, as well as aspirations for the future.

The 3 dimensions of wellbeing, although categorised separately for analytical purposes, are interrelated, and some elements of wellbeing, such as identity or health, can cut across 2 or 3 dimensions. In this paper, we look at perceptions of wellbeing that have emerged from men and women in CBF communities, and which dimensions of wellbeing are emphasised across gender, reservoir size and geographical location.

Methods

In addition to a literature review, this paper is based on primary data collected by Kanchana et al. (2025) and Paranamana et al. (2025), whose research methods are outlined in detail in their papers. Sample reservoir-based communities were selected from a total representative sample of 48 inland reservoirs, based primarily on size. In the gender-related studies, altogether 9 reservoir communities in 5 districts were selected between the 2 researchers based on criteria, such as geographical location, size of reservoir (minor, medium, major), sociocultural diversity (ethno-religious groups), and extent of involvement of women in CBF activities. Selection of respondents from households was based primarily on qualitative purposive sampling (Kanchana) and of actors along value chains was based on snowball sampling (Paranamana). Qualitative data collection methods included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individual female and male research participants from reservoir-based households

(Kanchana) and with individual actors indicative of the different nodes along CBF value chains (Paranamana), as well as separate FGDs with women and men from CBF communities. Kanchana’s sample comprised 296 individual respondents (49.6% female, 50.4% male) and 12 FGDs with women and men, while Paranamana’s sample included 56 individual value-chain actors (71% male, 29% female).

Context: Gender inequality and implications for CBF in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was a pioneer among developing countries historically in achieving gender equity in social indicators, such as education (UNESCO 2018; World Bank 2019) and health (WHO 2019). However, this has not been matched with bridging gender gaps in economic and political participation. All national economic

indicators, such as the labour force participation rate, employed population by gender, economically active population in the rural sector and employed persons in the agricultural/forestry/fishing sector, show a wide gap between women and men (DCS 2024). Moreover, the representation of women in both parliament and local government is exceedingly low, among the lowest in South Asia and the world (IPU 2025; CLGF 2018) (Table 5.1.1).

Sri Lanka’s overall ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), based on 4 indicators (economy, politics, education and health), has decreased markedly from 13 in 2006 to 122 in 2024 (World Economic Forum 2006; 2015; 2024). The country’s performance in economic participation/opportunity and political empowerment has been poor over the last 2 decades and has been deteriorating (Table 5.1.2).

Table 5.1.1: Gender status in Sri Lanka – indicators

Dimension	Indicator	Female	Male
Economic	Labour force participation rate (2023)*	31.3%	68.6%
	Employed population by gender (2023)*	33.7%	66.3%
	Economically active population in rural sector (2023)*	34.5%	65.5%
	Employed persons in agriculture, forestry and fishing (2023)*	32.1%	67.9%
Political	Representation in Parliament (2024) **	9.8%	90.2%
	Representation in local authorities (2017–2018) ***	29.1%	70.91%
Social	Net secondary school enrolment rate (2018) #	92.3%	89.8%
	Life expectancy at birth (2019) ##	80 yrs	74 yrs
	Disease burden – Disability adjusted Life Years (DALY’s by 100,000 population) (2019) +	2,612.4	3,045.6

Sources: *DCS (2024): Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2023; **Inter-parliamentary Union: Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments; ***CLGF 2018; #UNESCO 2019: Education and Literacy; ##World Bank 2019: Data Bank; + World Health Organization 2019.

Table 5.1.2: The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) – changing status of Sri Lanka

Year	Overall rank	Overall score	Economic participation and opportunity rank	Political empowerment rank	Educational attainment rank	Health and survival rank
2006	13 (total # 115)	0.7199	85	7	52	1
2015	84 (total # 145)	0.6860	120	59	57	1
2024	122 (total # 146)	0.6530	127	123	49	1

Sources: World Economic Forum (2006, 2015, 2024): Global Gender Gap Index.

Moreover, the global Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) reveals increasing gender inequality in Sri Lanka between 2009 and 2023, across all its 4 indicators (restrictions within family, physical integrity, access to productive/financial resources and civil liberties), with the aggregated index value of inequality ranked as ‘very high’ (OECD 2023). Both indices show that Sri Lanka’s global rank in gender status has deteriorated relative to other countries, with the country underperforming in bridging gender gaps and inequality, even within South Asia. The primary reason for an increase in gender inequality in Sri Lanka appears to be the consequences of armed conflict, militarisation and authoritarian political regimes (Gamage 2024) of the last 20 years. Gender inequity issues have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, including the economic crisis which began in 2022.

The disadvantaged position of women in Sri Lanka, however, has been fairly consistent for several centuries. Even though historical studies show a relatively positive gender status in the pre-colonial period (prior to the 16th century), this changed negatively during the colonial (1505–1948) and post-independence (1948–) periods. For example, traditional land tenure and inheritance laws (Kandyan law, Thesavalamai), which were favourable to women, were codified

in the colonial period to the benefit of men (Riseeuw 1988; Goonesekere 1990; Agarwal 1990), and the Land Development Ordinance introduced in 1935 continues to prioritise men in granting state land (Guneratne 2006; Fonseka and Raheem 2011). Relatively open sexual norms and practices among youth (Knox 1989), multiple forms of marriage and post-marital residence, some of which were favourable to women (Riseeuw 1988; Agarwal 1990), changed towards patrilocal marriage and residence due to imposition of Victorian norms in the colonial period, reinforced by Sri Lankan social and religious reformers (Riseeuw 1988; Ruwanpura 2006).

Thus, anthropological and sociological studies since the 1980s reveal that gender norms, roles and practices, as well as perceived differences in characteristics and behaviour of women and men are to the disadvantage of women. Thus, women’s engagement in livelihood activities, their mobility outside their home and village, and benefits derived from economic activities are negatively affected. Women’s wages tend to be lower than men’s, with an average pay gap of 27% (ILO 2024). This is based on cultural notions that women cannot do heavy work or women’s work is supplementary to that of men’s work as providers/breadwinners. Women’s primary roles are perceived as mother

and wife in the reproductive or private sphere (Schrijvers 1985) among all ethnic groups in Sri Lankan society. There is a reluctance to engage in paid work due to the household work burden and women often opt for flexible, household-based work (Gunatilaka 2013). Even though women perform many productive tasks, women are often perceived, by both men and women themselves, as not engaging in work as fishers or farmers in the productive/public sphere (Jayaweera 2015). Rather, the cultural perception is of helping (*udavukaranava*) the husband (Gunawardena 2016), despite long hours of work that women might put into agricultural or fish processing activities. Taboos restricting women from access to resources (boats, fishing nets) or entry into land or marine spaces exist in different parts of the country due to beliefs in impurity (*killā*) of women (Weeratunge et al. 2021). Moreover, women who are more closely associated with religious activities than men, are more likely to be subjected to the ambiguous perception towards fishing, as violating the Buddhist principle of refraining from taking life, a belief held within the Sinhala Buddhist ethnic group.

Gender-based violence and harassment, prevalent among all ethnic groups, compound the situation of gender inequality in Sri Lanka. Micro-level studies since the 1990s indicate a wide range of incidence – between 20% to 72% of women as subjected to domestic violence, depending on area and social group (Guruge et al. 2016). A large proportion of women express attitudes that indicate a level of tolerance towards violence. For example, the Demographic and Health Survey of 2006–2007 (DCS 2009) indicated that around 53% of women perceived that wife-beating was justified for one or more reasons, such as burning the

food, arguing with the husband, going out without telling the husband, neglecting the children, and refusing sexual intercourse. Harassment and violence against women in the workplace and public transport have been linked to the low female labour participation rate (UNDP 2021), while online abuse and violence against women entering the political sphere (Athukorala et al. 2021) is a factor identified for the unusually low female representation in politics.

The implication for CBF development within this overall context of gender inequality in Sri Lanka is that there is a critical need to increase women's economic participation in reservoir-based communities and benefits derived from CBF value-chain activities. Moreover, this needs to be accompanied by increasing women's representation in governance structures within CBF communities, such as membership and decision-making within fisheries societies. Such changes would lead to women's empowerment and wellbeing in CBF communities.

Knowledge gaps in gender issues within CBF in Sri Lanka

There is a lack of studies on CBF, based on systematic and rigorous gender analysis, in Sri Lanka, pointing to knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. The participation rate of women in inland fisheries (of which CBF is a component) at 5.53% in 2022 (MOF 2023), was lower than in the agricultural/fisheries/forestry sector as a whole, as indicated above. Women engaged in CBF include female heads of households, especially in post-war north and eastern parts of the country, and women from marginal communities in the dry zone, where most reservoirs are located. As women are often invisible in the fisheries sector in general, actual



engagement of women in CBF is likely to be higher. From available studies (De Silva et al. 2006; Amarasinghe et al. 2016) and field observations, the gender division of labour in CBF value chains pointed to men concentrated in fishing, trading (micro- and small-scale) and transport, women focused on processing, and to a small extent on gleaning and trading (micro-scale), and both involved in disentangling fish from nets and mending nets.

There have been few development projects that have addressed gender inclusion in CBF in Sri Lanka – however, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Aquatic Resources Development and Quality Improvement project of 2003–2010 did involve a gender inclusion focus. Among its interventions to improve gender equity, women's membership in fisheries societies was increased to 10%, around 21% of loans were provided to women, and separate women's subcommittees were initiated in 35% of fisheries societies under the project (ADB 2010). Among other outputs were increased engagement of women in bookkeeping, collection of fisheries data within societies and handling the fish harvest in landing sites. The project also provided training in fish drying and salting, reservoir bund preparation, fingerling harvesting, as well as in non-fisheries supplementary income generating activities for women.

However, available studies and projects lack systematic data on gender roles and relations within CBF value chains, such as how women and men are differently located in value-chain nodes and engage in specific tasks/activities within these value-chain nodes; what benefits and costs accrue to women and men by participating in CBF value chains; and the gendered nature of governance within CBF communities. There is a need for an analysis of the gender norms and practices underlying

CBF value chains, the vulnerability context within which these chains operate, and perceptions of social wellbeing among women and men in CBF communities to understand the motivations for and outcomes from CBF engagement. These are some of the knowledge gaps that this paper seeks to address.

Gender insights from social science research of the ACIAR project

Two objectives of the ACIAR project were based primarily on social scientific data collection and analysis, and directly addressed gender concerns. These were:

- Objective 2: Conduct an inclusive, complete market-chain analysis from harvest to plate, to ensure post-harvest and supply practices meet market requirements and both male and female actors in the supply chain gain maximum benefits.
- Objective 4: Determine opportunities and constraints to achieving socially equitable livelihood benefits from CBF.

Gender inclusive value-chain analysis

In terms of Objective 2, gender-inclusive value-chain analysis (Paranamana et al. 2025) provided fresh insights on gender differences in the location of and engagement as actors in CBF value chains. In terms of the social relations approach outlined above, gender relations within the institutional context of the market emerged from this analysis. It revealed an overall predominance of men in all nodes within these value chains, with higher engagement of women in finfish value chains, relative to GFP chains. The highest participation of women was in dried finfish processing (76.5%) and in local, micro-scale retailing (47.1%) of dried finfish. The main engagement of women in the GFP value chain was in the primary handling node

(44.6%). The proportion of women engaged in fishing at 5.2% was lower than the global average for inland fisheries.

The data also showed differences in distribution of benefits and costs from value-chain participation across the 2 chain types (finfish and GFP), according to node actors and gender. Fishers (predominantly male) had higher returns in terms of market margins from the finfish value chain, relative to the GFP value chain. Fishers (predominantly male) had higher returns from the fresh finfish value chain relative to the dried finfish value chain. The highest returns in terms of market margin from GFP accrued to secondary collectors (predominantly male), followed by fishers. The lowest market margin accrued to primary collectors (both male and female). The highest returns in terms of market margin from fresh finfish value chains accrued to fishers, followed by wholesalers, with retailers receiving the lowest market margin.

Value-chain nodes in which women were predominant, such as dried fish processing, or had a relatively large share, such as primary handling in GFP, had lower returns than those in which men predominated. In the case of the dried fish value chain, the highest returns went to wholesalers (predominantly male). While actors who received higher returns generally bore higher risks and had higher variable costs, it is not clear whether the differences in benefits along value-chain actors can be explained entirely by the risks involved. This is indicated by the differences in bargaining power of and competition among node actors. In the GFP value chain, bargaining power was highest for secondary collectors/exporters and lowest for primary collectors with fishers in between. Competition also showed a similar pattern. In the finfish value chain, bargaining power was

highest for retailers and lowest for fishers/processors with wholesalers in between. Competition, on the other hand, was highest among retailers and lowest among wholesalers with fishers/processors in between.

Several gendered constraints to value-chain engagement emerged, such as women's activities in CBF not being recognised as work but as 'support' to men and thus not rewarded financially, women producers not possessing adequate bargaining power and women having less access to membership and decision-making in fisheries societies. Opportunities for women's participation identified were that women are generally considered as skillful in financial matters and in handling of GFP, which requires care to ensure that the carapace and claws are not damaged.

Gender roles and relations within CBF-related households

The main thrust of gender analysis under this project was incorporated within Objective 4 in the gender-focused study of Kanchana et al. (2025). This study is based on the social relations approach to identify gender roles and relations within the reservoir-based livelihood system, including women's inclusion in governance. Moreover, the social wellbeing approach was used to understand gender differences in motivations and outcomes in engaging in CBF-related livelihoods. The analysis addresses gender relations within the institutional spheres of household and community, and to some extent with the state, as community-based fisheries societies and extension services for CBF come under the purview of the state regulatory institution, National Aquaculture Development Authority of Sri Lanka (NAQDA).

Gender division of labour and relations

Research data (Kanchana et al. 2025; Kanchana 2025) revealed that men were predominant in most CBF-related activities in study households, ranging from 57% in retailing dried fish to 98% in collecting bait. Around 93% of fishers were men who fished alone, while 6% fished with female family members. Women were engaged in most tasks identified, apart from processing fresh fish for the market. Their participation was very low in collecting bait, as well as wholesaling and retailing of fresh finfish and GFP. Women's participation in fishing at 7% (1% who fished alone and 6% who fished with male family members) was slightly higher than indicated for inland fishing in national statistics but lower than the global average. Households reported substantial engagement of women in a range of CBF-related activities: 63% (19% alone, 44% jointly with men) in dried fish processing; 43% (24% alone, 19% jointly with men) in dried fish retailing (mostly at the local, micro-level); 29% (3% alone, 26% jointly with men) in mending nets; 16% (3% alone, 13% jointly with men) in purchasing fishing assets (canoes/boats, nets).

Both women and men participate in CBF mostly at household level with help from immediate family members. Women's CBF activities are perceived as 'supporting' men, while housework and childcare are seen as women's main tasks. The social norm that fishing is not women's work is strongly upheld by both men and women. However, in 4 of the 7 reservoirs – 2 located in the North Western (Puttalam district) and 2 in the North Eastern (Trincomalee and Mullaitivu districts) provinces – female respondents reported that more women had been involved in reservoir fishing in the past but stopped due to increased housework, migration overseas or decrease in fish stocks. The prevailing norm is

associated primarily with the perceived lack of fishing knowledge and skills by women and the prioritisation of housework, considered as a female task.

We can't go fishing. That's a male thing.
(Wife of fisher, Balahuruwa, Moneragala district)

Women are doing housework. They [the men] say that they are ashamed to take women for fishing activities. (Female farmer/wife of fisher, Mahadivulwewa, Trincomalee district)

Moreover, risks involved in fishing and the security of women in engaging in fishing on the reservoir at night were also mentioned as reasons for non-participation.

Only men deal with the risk [of fishing]. Women are not willing to go with them.
(Wife of fisher, Thabbowa, Puttalam district)

Women cannot go to the reservoir at night. There is no time to do anything else with housework. Women don't understand nets. (Male fisher, Kottukachchiya, Puttalam district)

The social norm that fishing is a male task has resulted in women's lack of access to fisheries assets, even though around a fifth of women were involved in decision-making around purchase of these assets within the household. The main constraint to participating in CBF identified by women related to their roles as wives and mothers, with housework and childcare perceived as their primary activity, based on underlying gender norms and practices. Other constraints were lack of fishing knowledge and skills, as well as religious concerns. In contrast, men indicated environment and tenure-related constraints, such as impact of climate uncertainty on fish stocks, access to the fisheries resource and illegal fishing. Men saw more opportunities than women

in increased incomes from harvesting GFP, as well as finfish, while women perceived potential for increasing dried fish production and retail, consistent with their customary gender division of labour.

Governance

Women's contribution to decision-making within the community in relation to CBF was extremely low (Kanchana et al. 2025; Kanchana 2025). Only 3 out of the 7 reservoir communities studied included female members in fisheries societies. Lack of access to membership was linked with non-engagement of women in fishing, as well as exclusion of women by male members or husbands.

As women are not involved in fishing activities, they are not members of the society. (Female farmer/wife of fisher, Kottukachchiya, Puttalam district)

There are no women in the fisheries society. Men don't want women to come. (Wife of fisher, Ridiyagama, Hambantota district)

Women's membership ranged from 16.6% in Urusitawewa, 25% in Tabbowa to 28% in Iranamadu fisheries society. The Iranamadu reservoir community, located in the north-eastern Mullaitivu district, is inhabited by war-affected Tamil households, with a larger proportion of female-headed households.

Becoming a member gives you the opportunity to fish and also provides you with the opportunity to strengthen your income. My husband's mother goes fishing in the reservoir. So, I go with them. Then I joined this society because I wanted to do fishing. (Female fisher, Iranamadu, Mullaitivu district)

The practice of women's involvement in fisheries activities has been higher in the North Western (Puttalam district) and North Eastern (Mullaitivu and Trincomalee

districts) provinces historically. Thus, in 2 fisheries societies (Mahadivulwewa in Trincomalee district and Tabbowa in Puttalam district), women indicated that they were involved in decision-making. However, men were twice more likely to be engaged in decision-making than women in Mahadivulwewa and 3 times as more in Tabbowa. Even though women are not members of the Mahadivulwewa fisheries society, they pointed out that they participated in place of their husbands, when the latter were otherwise engaged. Thus, it appears that they contribute to decision-making within the society without being members. Meanwhile, women members indicated their relatively active participation in the fisheries society in Iranamadu.

I talk when I need to talk. (Female fisher, Iranamadu, Mullaitivu district)

We talk about the price of fish and the time to dry fish. (Female fisher/processor, Iranamadu, Mullaitivu district)

However, despite voicing their concerns and issues in discussions, female members of the Iranamadu fisheries society did not affirm that they contributed to the decision-making of the society.

Social wellbeing

Notions of social wellbeing within CBF communities, based on Kanchana's (2025) fieldwork data, were wide-ranging, with the emphasis on one or more dimensions (material, relational and subjective), varying across reservoirs. Material wellbeing was most often articulated in terms of income, money, work, fishing, fish catch, farming, lack of debt, house, vehicle, food security and education. Notions of relational wellbeing that emerged were linked to strong family and community relations, living in harmony, helping



others, working together, not harming or troubling others and living without conflict. Subjective wellbeing notions that were frequently indicated related to living well, having a good life, happiness, freedom, independence, good health, religious practice, lack of suffering and a trouble-free life.

In both major reservoir communities (Iranamadu and Ridiyagama), the emphasis on the material wellbeing dimension was higher than on the other 2 dimensions. In one of the minor reservoir communities (Balahuruwa), relational wellbeing was emphasised over other dimensions, while in one of the medium reservoir communities (Tabbowa), the subjective wellbeing dimension was indicated as most important. In the other 3 reservoir communities, combinations of 2 wellbeing dimensions emerged as equally important – subjective/relational (Urusitawewa) and material/subjective (Mahadivulwewa) dimensions in 2 medium reservoir communities and relational/material dimensions in the minor reservoir community (Kottukachchiya). In general, these findings are consistent with Ekanayake's (2025) quantitative data, based on a randomised survey sample, on perceptions of social equity and livelihood benefits from CBF. These data revealed that while income was the most important motivation for CBF in major reservoirs, food security and independence were also factors of consideration in pursuing CBF in medium and minor reservoirs. Ekanayake's results also pointed to higher levels of poverty in medium and minor reservoir communities, compared to major reservoir communities, thus suggesting the importance of food security from inland fisheries production in the former types of reservoirs. In the relatively remote Moneragala district, the non-material

dimensions of wellbeing were emphasised in both the medium (Urusitawewa) and minor (Balahuruwa) reservoir communities. The medium reservoir community of Mahadivulwewa in Trincomalee district was noteworthy in that food security emerged as the most frequently indicated material aspect of wellbeing.

There were no marked gender difference in dimensions of wellbeing emphasised within most reservoir communities, pointing to shared notions between women and men. However, there was a slightly higher emphasis on material wellbeing by women in major and medium reservoir communities, and on relational wellbeing in minor reservoir communities. The overall focus on relational wellbeing by both women and men in minor reservoir communities suggest higher social cohesion within these communities.

Self-assessment of wellbeing and perceptions of satisfaction/dissatisfaction

The majority of research participants perceived that they had a good life, ranging from 50% of men in Kottukachchiya to 100% of women and men in Balahuruwa. The only exception was women from Ridiyagama, of whom only a minority of 33% thought that they had a good life. More women in Iranamadu, Urusitawewa and Kottukachchiya, and more men in Mahadivulawewa, perceived that they had a good life.

The majority of respondents (in 4 reservoir communities – Ridiyagama, Urusitawewa, Tabbowa and Mahadivulwewa) were satisfied with relational wellbeing aspects, with some differences among women and men within these communities. More men than women in Kottukachchiya were satisfied with material wellbeing aspects. In 2 reservoir communities

(Balahuruwa and Iranamadu), most research participants were satisfied with a combination of relational and material aspects of wellbeing. There was no gender difference in Iranamadu. However, more men than women were satisfied with material wellbeing in Balahuruwa, while the converse was true in the case of relational wellbeing.

The majority of respondents in 6 out of the 7 reservoir communities expressed most dissatisfaction with material wellbeing aspects, such as inadequate income or work, lack of a vehicle or house. Inadequate fish catches were indicated in Tabbowa and Mahadivulwewa medium reservoir communities. The only exception was Urusitawewa (medium), where respondents were dissatisfied with relational wellbeing aspects, expressed in terms of a negative influence exerted by people on the social environment due to alcoholism and drug abuse. A minority of research participants, both women and men, mentioned the ill effects of alcoholism and drug abuse in the 2 major reservoir communities (Iranamadu and Ridiyagama) and one other medium reservoir community (Tabbowa) as well.

Domestic violence and other issues facing women

Domestic violence, attributed to alcoholism and drug abuse, was reported by women and men from all reservoir communities. While women were more forthcoming with reporting domestic violence in the medium reservoir communities, a larger proportion of men reported its occurrence in the major and minor reservoir communities. The incidence or reporting of it was very low in Urusitawewa, although the majority of respondents there expressed dissatisfaction with the impacts of alcoholism. In addition to the physical and emotional harm caused

to women, domestic violence reveals underlying resource conflicts between women and men at household level, as violence was often related to the control of money for alcohol or drugs by men versus food and other household expenses by women. Other issues faced by women were harassment in the workplace and on roads, lack of transport, lack of freedom, childcare burden, lack of access to work, security concerns, kidnapping of minors and rape.

Foreseeing the future and aspirations for children

The majority of research participants (in 4 of the 7 reservoir communities) foresaw improvement in their material wellbeing in the future. A better economic situation, entailing higher incomes, better houses and vehicles, were frequently mentioned aspirations. Respondents in Iranamadu and Mahadivulwewa emphasised the subjective wellbeing dimension, in terms of a good life, happiness and freedom. A combination of subjective and material factors emerged in Tabbowa. In both Iranamadu and Tabbowa, the spiritual aspect of subjective wellbeing – the assistance of the gods and religious practice – was also mentioned. Moving out of fishing was envisaged by several respondents in Tabbowa and Kottukachchiya, both located in the Puttalam district. In contrast to the initial articulation of wellbeing notions, where women were more likely to emphasise material dimensions of wellbeing, men were more likely to focus on material wellbeing in anticipating the future, in most study communities.

In expressing aspirations for their children, the majority of respondents, both women and men (in 5 of the 7 reservoir communities) emphasised material wellbeing aspects, such as good education and good jobs. However, subjective



wellbeing factors, such as aspirations for a good life and happiness for children emerged as more important in Iranamadu and Balahuruwa reservoir communities. In all of the medium reservoir communities and in Kottikachchiya (minor) and Ridiyagama (major), a minority of research participants also articulated that being a good person, a good/productive citizen and contributing to society were aspirations for their children. In several reservoir communities (Ridiyagama, Tabbowa, Mahadivulwewa), aspirations for children to move out of the parental occupations of fishing or farming were expressed by both men and women.

Conclusion

Gender analysis in reservoir communities in Sri Lanka reveals predominant engagement of men along CBF value chains. Women's participation is considerably lower relative to that of men, with women confined to a few nodes, such as dried finfish processing and retailing, and primary handling of GFP, which bring lower returns than nodes in which men are engaged. Gender disparities in economic participation and benefits, as well as in governance, especially membership and decision-making in fisheries societies, reveal serious challenges in addressing gender gaps in CBF. In assessing social wellbeing, while women appear relatively satisfied with their lives, gender-based violence was reported from almost all reservoir-based communities studied. Within the context of growing gender inequality in Sri Lanka in the last 2 decades, addressing gender concerns within CBF communities and enhancing equitable opportunities for both women and men are critical. The implications of this analysis is that a gender transformative approach is needed to address inequities within the CBF sector.

Gender transformative approaches, from the 2000s, focus on the underlying causes of gender inequalities that limit the lives and livelihoods of women and men (McDougall et al. 2021). These constraints are structural, encompassing formal (policies), semi-formal (systems) and informal (norms) factors, which need to undergo change. Barriers to engage with, reduce or overcome structural constraints, from household, community, national to global levels need to be identified and transformed.

In terms of policies within the Sri Lankan context, the latest National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy of 2018 (MFARD 2018) is committed to gender equality with provisions for promoting equal opportunities for women's participation, equal access to resources and benefits, gender mainstreaming in fisheries development strategies and women's contribution to finding joint solutions. However, it has no institutional mechanisms or action plan to implement this commitment, especially in the CBF sector. Thus, a gender transformative action plan for the CBF sector, based on institutional changes to redistribute power and resources with targets, timeframe and monitoring is needed. In considering institutional systems, data are currently collected on inland fish harvesting but women's activities remain invisible and under-counted, especially in gleaning and post-harvesting activities. Disaggregated data collection for all activities related to CBF needs to be done and extension services need to be provided for women, as well as men. The gender data and analysis, which has been generated by social science research under this ACIAR project, constitute an important contribution to this effort. In terms of the normative factor, it is a long-term process to change gender

norms and practices within households and communities. However, NAQDA and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could work with communities to assess and value current women's work, increase their engagement in CBF value-chain nodes that bring adequate returns and promote their greater contribution to fisheries governance, as well as disseminate appropriate technology to enable more opportunities for women. Interventions need to address current disparities, and ensure that higher benefits from value chains accrue to women, based on a participatory, consultative process with women and men in CBF communities.

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