

A novel framework to better understand gender relations using dried fish value chains

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This paper highlights key ideas and concepts that can be linked to developing a novel framework to broaden the study of gender within the dried fish value chain. It is a synthesis of a lengthier publication that was recently published in the journal *Maritime Studies* (Galappaththi et al. 2021).

Women comprise a significant portion of the workforce in the dried fish value chain, which is a hidden subsector that is predominantly within small-scale fisheries in Asia and Africa. Through their employment in value chains, women generate significant and diverse benefits, including income, employment, food, kinship ties and cultural connections. Despite the benefits, women also face constraints that severely restrict their ability to fully participate in and benefit from value chain activities compared to men (e.g. lack of access to good quality fish, gendered norms of access to markets). Moreover, women who belong to marginalised groups such as lower castes, widows and refugees bear the brunt of these inequities. In other words, women and men are positioned differently within the value chain in relation to the benefits they can generate within a given context.

Existing frameworks to examine gender perspectives within value chains, however, pay little attention to the diverse benefits supported by the value chains or the context-specific factors that shape such benefits. To address this gap, we developed a novel framework to help us systematically unravel the complexity of gender relations within dried fish value chains (Fig. 1). The application of the new framework can create a “thick description” of gender relations – a deeper analysis that brings special attention to contextual details and social meanings that individuals ascribe to their own experiences (Geertz 1973). In doing so, we link the concepts of value chains, relationality, social wellbeing and intersectionality.

Value chains: overlapping nodes and the notion of “value”

A value chain refers to the series of nodes or activities that enable the procurement of inputs, transformation into outputs, and distribution to consumers (Porter 1985). Key value chain nodes pertaining to dried fish include fish harvesting, drying and/or processing, trading and distribution. Women and men are both employed across these nodes. Women may work in small groups to dry fish (drying node) and to sell in nearby markets (trading node). In doing so, they not only earn an income but also socialise and

maintain social connections and a sense of belongingness. These diverse benefits often extend beyond mere economic or monetary terms. In fact, the term “value” opens up an opportunity to rethink the complexity of value creation by focusing on the range of values supported by the value chains.

Relationality as the point of departure

In developing a novel framework, our point of departure from the existing literature is the notion of relationality. Relationality refers to the creation of experiences in relation to one another within a given context. Attention to relationality not only reveals the socially and culturally distinct ways people benefit from value chain participation, but also illuminates how such benefits are shaped by the social structures operating within value chains (e.g. gender, caste, ethnicity).

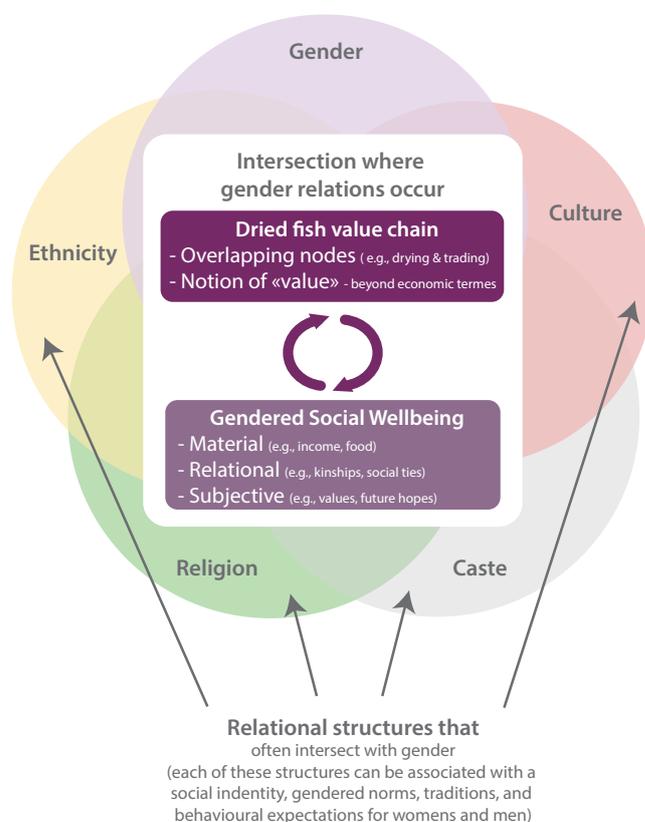


Figure 1. An integrated framework to study gender relations in dried fish value chains. Source: Galappaththi et al. 2021

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Social wellbeing: Meanings and social connections that matter

The social wellbeing concept emphasises multiple ways that people perceive and pursue wellbeing (McGregor 2008). The three-dimensions of social wellbeing include: material wellbeing (e.g. income, employment), relational wellbeing (e.g. kinship ties, sense of belongingness), and subjective wellbeing (e.g. values, future hopes, mutual trust). Using a social wellbeing lens and its three dimensions can help examine the range of benefits generated through dried fish value chains.

Intersectionality: Intersecting structures of oppression

Intersectionality highlights how systems of power and oppression – such as sexism, racism and classism – intersect and shape people’s lived experiences within a given context (Crenshaw 1991). By definition, intersectional analysis brings attention to marginalised and disadvantaged groups (e.g. women, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples). Within dried fish value chains, intersectionality helps examine the relational structures (e.g. caste, ethnicity) that intersect with gender to uniquely position women and men within the value chain.

The novel framework and its applications

When the concepts highlighted above are woven together, the resulting framework helps broaden the conceptual and analytical focus of existing approaches to analyse gender in value chains. A two-way linkage exists between the value chain and social wellbeing because improved wellbeing leads to better value chain outcomes. Since the unique array of structures operating within a given value chain is shaped by the context it is embedded in, the framework can be modified to include any additional structures (e.g. marital status, age, sexuality).

The application of this new framework can result in a thick description of gender relations, including rich insights into women’s and men’s differential positions, wellbeing outcomes, underlying forms of discrimination, and the root causes of inequities operating in value chains. Such nuanced and applied insights may inform policy frameworks, practice interventions and programme development towards achieving equitable outcomes for everyone participating in value chains.



Family-based fish drying operation in western Sri Lanka. © C. Hiroshini Wedige

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Women working in a Nazirartek fish drying yard in Bangladesh. © Derek Johnson/DriedFishMatters.org