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ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

Fishing communities in several parts of the world have been fishing for generations. Over time, they have evolved systems of internal governance and ways of regulating resource use. For many such communities, fisheries is not only a livelihood, it is a culture, an identity and a way of life.

Globally, given the growing pressure on fisheries resources, there is recognition of the need to improve management of fisheries resources and habitats, and, equally, of the importance of retaining identities, cultural traditions and community values. It is becoming evident that any system of management, if it is to succeed, must build on existing social systems, taking note of socio-economic, cultural and ecological specificities. In this context it is being pointed out that community-based systems of management, founded on systems of internal governance and self-regulation within communities, can play a vital role, given that community decision-making processes are relatively democratic and consensual.

While this may be true, it is equally the case that consensual decision-making often excludes women's participation, and that this omission is justified in the name of 'tradition' and 'culture'. Typically, the cultural norms prevailing in society, including in fishing communities, dictate that most decisions within the household and community are made by men, even when these involve women. Whether cultural norms should supersede norms of justice and fairness is, of course, highly questionable.

There is also a need to take a critical look at the prevailing sex-based division of labour, which is also justified in the name of tradition and culture. Tasks such as cooking, taking care of the physical health and emotional needs of family members, engaging in post-harvest fisheries-related work, preparing for ceremonies, rituals and festivals, contributing to community events like weddings, funerals and birth ceremonies, supporting community members during times of need, and so on, are performed by women. While this work is critical for the survival and reproduction of the household and community, because it takes place in the 'private' sphere, it is hardly recognized, acknowledged or supported.

Why is this work, so essential yet so devalued, seen only as women's work? Is it not necessary to reshape the cultural norms that impose this sexual division of labour? Should the false separation of the 'private' and 'public' spheres not be challenged? While there is a strong case for valorizing and building on tradition and on cultural norms, values and institutions, this should not be at the cost of violating women's human rights.

Analyzing women's experiences of life-sustaining work performed at home, in the community and in the market place, shows that culture and tradition are not static, immutable relations. On the contrary, women in many different contexts have challenged what appeared to be fixed, taken-for-granted assumptions about women's work, their roles and the value of these roles in their communities. In some instances, changes in women's work have come through contradictory forces, such as globalization, yielding certain benefits to women whilst threatening other social or ecological relations in their communities (see page 2). In other contexts, changed gender relations have come through lengthy struggles in which women have fought hard to carve out space for themselves in traditionally male-defined domains.

Across widely divergent cultures and contexts, women are redefining many assumptions about the nature of human rights, questioning the ethic for adjudicating human morality, and emphasizing the importance of adopting a more transformative approach that balances contested and competing rights in favour of a broader conception of what it means to be part of a social, economic and ecological community. **✉**



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