

Invisibly yours

The useful work and energy that women expend in fisheries remain invisible and undervalued, as participants at a workshop in Brazil reported

A six-day workshop on *Gender and Coastal Fishing Communities in Latin America* was organized recently, in June 2000, in the coastal fishing village of Prainha do Canto Verde, in the State of Ceara, Brazil, as part of ICSF's Women in Fisheries (WIF) programme.

The workshop had the following objectives:

- to develop an understanding of trends in fisheries development and their implications for coastal fishing communities in the Latin American context;
- to make visible women's roles in fisheries and in fishing communities in Latin America, and to reflect on strategies to strengthen their meaningful participation; and
- to facilitate greater networking among organizations representing, and working with, artisanal fishworkers in the Latin American context.

A total of 36 persons participated in the workshop, including representatives from five countries in the Latin American region, i.e. Chile, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico, and representatives of ICSF from India, Belgium and Brazil. The group that came together was diverse and rich in experience. It included representatives from the Confederacion Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Chile (CONAPACH), Federacion de Integracion Y Unificacion de Pescadores (FIUPAP), Movimento Nacional dos Pescadores (MONAPE) and Federacion Nacional de Cooperativas Pesqueras del Ecuador (FENACOPEC), the national fishworker

organizations from Chile, Peru, Brazil and Ecuador respectively. It also included representatives from NGOs, research institutes and organizations supporting fishworkers from Brazil, Chile, Peru and Mexico.

Participants included both men and women. This was a conscious decision, since gender was seen as an issue which both men and women of fishworker organizations, NGOs, etc. need to engage with. Equally significant, all the country delegations felt similarly, and both the male and female leadership of the organizations invited participated in the workshop.

As part of the pre-workshop preparations, five background papers on gender and fisheries were prepared from four countries in the Latin American region: one each from Chile, Peru and Mexico and two from Brazil. These papers were useful in highlighting important issues *vis-à-vis* gender and fisheries in several countries of the region, and they provided the backdrop for discussions during the workshop.

The main sessions included presentations and discussions on the following:

- a global overview of trends in fisheries development, with special reference to the Latin American context;
- background papers on gender and fisheries in countries of the Latin American region;
- World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF);
- the development debate and a framework for social analysis as a

possible tool to analyze social reality and the reality of fishing communities;

- globalization and social movements in Latin America; and
- fishworker organizations in the Latin American region.

During the workshop, it became clear that in all the countries represented, i.e. Chile, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico, the pressure on coastal fishing communities and on their livelihoods is increasing. This is also a consequence of globalization and the neoliberal policies being adopted by States in the region.

The picture that emerged about the work of women within the fisheries and within fishing communities was revealing. It was clear, of course, that this differs by culture and region and between rural and urban areas, and that, it is not possible to generalize. The common factor, however, is that the work of women is rarely seen as 'productive'. It has low social value and is normally seen as an extension of the 'domestic' space. Little value is attached to the domestic and community tasks performed by women.

This is despite the enormous diversity of tasks performed by women. Within the fisheries, women may work in marketing,

preparing bait, making and repairing nets, collecting crabs and shellfish, gathering and cultivating seaweed and algae, smoking, salting and drying fish, and, in rare cases, fishing itself.

Women also take on work on behalf of their fishermen husbands, such as dealing with financial institutions for credit for fisheries operations and for repayment, dealing with the governmental fisheries agencies, and so on.

They are very active in the processing sector, as either part-time or full-time workers in processing plants. The nature of the work they do is typically repetitive and low-paid. The conditions of work and social security leave much to be desired.

Often, women of coastal fishing communities take on activities outside the fishery, that give them some form of stable monetary income, since the income from the fishery is inherently unstable and unpredictable. Also, given the nature of work of the fishermen and their frequent absences, women are almost entirely responsible for the family and its sustenance, and it is often such additional sources of income that help them take the family through lean periods.

Political struggles

Women of fishing communities have been active in political struggles. The issues they have mobilized around have

differed. In Chile, for example, women have been active in the struggle against individual transferable quotas (ITQs); in Peru and Brazil, they have campaigned for better access to social security; and in Mexico, against pollution by oil companies.

In addition, women, as everywhere else, are entirely responsible for the care and nurture of the family. Where the men stay away fishing for long periods, as in North Chile, women run the household in the absence of their husbands. They are important actors in the fishing community and also in maintaining social networks and the culture of the community.

Why then does the work of women continue to be invisible? It was in this context that the workshop saw several interesting and thought-provoking discussions on gender issues. There were many debates on what the concept of gender actually was or meant, and how this conceptual understanding could be translated into practical initiatives. There were, as can be expected, several different positions.

There was consensus that women have always been important in the fisheries and in fishing communities. They have always formed the core around which family and community life has been organized. However, on several other issues, there were debates and discussions, with different positions and many questions emerging from the participants.

One position articulated by a participant was that 'gender' is very much a concept introduced from the West. Traditional societies in many parts of the developing world are based on relations of complementarity, where both men and women perform different, but complementary, roles. In indigenous societies, the sea is seen as a woman, as a source of life, and there is respect for both. These societies are based on a respect for women and nature. There is no concept of inequality and competition in relations between men and women; rather, the emphasis is on oneness and complementarity. However, modernization and the influence of other cultures, have modified these positive

features. The need, therefore, is to value or own culture, and to revive it.

However, the position of many others differed. Some felt it is important to recognize that women are discriminated against in many ways within our communities. While men and women may be born with the same potential, they do not have the same opportunities in life. Women face more obstacles. Men tend to have more power within the family and community, and this has been used and abused, sometimes taking the form of violence within the family. This kind of violence seemed to be common, and as one of the participants from Mexico put it, "violence will never end since our children are being raised in it. They will imitate their fathers."

It was also recognized that the work of women, especially within the household, has not been valued. There is need to change this perception and to ascribe value to this work.

It is as important, though, to be cautious of creating conflicts between men and women over differences in perspective on gender issues. There was also some concern about professionals, who may not have the same perspective, working with fishing communities on gender issues, as this could lead to divisions within the community. Discussions on such issues need to take place within a larger context of affirming the culture and identity of coastal fishing communities, and of strengthening these communities. It should take place within a context of creating a new type of society, which values the labour and role of women. Another position closely connected to this emphasized the creation of a society based on a respect for women and nature.

In general, there was a commitment and receptiveness among the participants to gender issues within their own contexts. Several participants spoke of the work they had already initiated along similar lines.

Verbal concern

However, as one pointed out with some bitterness, the issue may remain a merely verbal concern, with little actual implementation taking place. According

The proposals

These proposals are geared to increase, as much as possible, the role of women in the fisheries sector, to grant them recognition and participation, to reinforce the visibility and political power of artisanal fishing communities, and to search for socially just and responsible strategies for fisheries development.

The proposals were classified into the following categories:

1. Information and Analysis

Work towards a detailed collation and systematization of data and analyses concerning fishing communities, with specific reference to gender relations. The data and analyses must be shared between communities and organizations.

National co-ordinating committees should be formed to carry out this analysis. Those undertaking the assessment must work out a proposal for participatory analysis to be undertaken in different regions, with the objective of identifying:

- the status of women in the fishing communities (coastal and riverine)
- their activities, both in the public and private (domestic) sphere;
- the impact of existing pressures on fishing communities, especially with relation to the life of women.

2. Stimulation and Participation

Facilitate, stimulate and increase the participation of women within the fisheries and in fishing communities, through a combination of actions and events. These programmes

must provide a forum for women to meet and to evolve methods for ensuring their participation. They must open up spaces for women, in their daily life and in professional and community organizations.

Facilitate discussions on fisheries organizations and on promoting the participation of women in them.

Stimulate and guarantee the presence, and effective participation of, women, as well as their proposals and demands, in the national and international activities of fishworkers.

Facilitate the creation of women's departments within fishworker organizations, and promote the opening up of spaces within these organizations, which would help women define and defend their interests and needs.

All these actions should aim to:

- highlight the contribution of women within the fisheries sector and within community life;
- facilitate the legal recognition of women workers in this sector;
- take measures against the exploitation suffered by women in the workplace.
- ensure that the demands and the interests of women are taken into consideration in public policies, employment and income-generation programmes, educational programmes, training, credit and health programmes.

to her, some colleagues talk of gender, but when they come to power, they do not create a space for women fishworkers within the organization. The projects they pursue have nothing to do with women. Practice, not talk, is important, she stressed.

In the same vein, another participant stressed that increasing the participation of women should also mean creating the spaces within organizations to discuss issues that are of concern to women, and in which they are the subjects. Women should not be seen merely as agents

supporting the agendas of their men. One participant cautioned about the way mainstream agencies are interpreting gender in fisheries issues.

These are often reduced to the need for increasing women's economic participation in the fishery, without an understanding of the larger social context. To strengthen the participation of women, the promotion of their role in aquaculture is being mooted as one answer. It was generally agreed that this was a reductionist approach.

- contribute towards making the relationship between women and men more just, so that both have access to the means to aid their personal, professional, familial and cultural fulfilment.
- contribute, at the same time, towards reducing domestic violence.

3. Education and Training

Facilitate training programmes that enable fishing communities themselves to carry out surveys, and document their work and activities, so as to have at their disposal permanent means to aid and evaluate their work.

Encourage the conduct of training programmes for communities, from the perspective of gender, among other issues.

Popularize the Chilean and Brazilian experience, where the effort is towards the generation of information which aids the fishworker movement.

Develop the gender focus within the sector.

Collect and share information on fisheries and policies relating to fisheries.

4. Sharing of Experience

Facilitate the establishment of a permanent working group which allows for an exchange of experiences.

Promote alliances with other sectors in civil society so that the fisheries sector comes to be accepted as an important social entity.

Seek an exchange of experiences with relation to areas reserved for artisanal fisheries, highlighting the role of women in the management of these areas.

Build up relations and exchange with other organizations (of workers, farmers, educational entities, etc.) which have more experience on gender issues.

Promote ways by which women from the fisheries sectors can be present at, and participate in, international and national events pertaining to women.

Encourage the setting up of forums and exchanges among women in the coastal and riverine areas.

5. Judicial Landmarks and Public Policies for Fisheries

Seek a review of legislation that defines a fishworker as one who engages only in fish-capture activities.

Seek a review of fisheries legislation from a gender perspective.

Collaborate in redefining the significance of the term 'artisanal fisheries' in such a manner that there exists a common understanding of it, taking into consideration the differences between countries and continents.

Seek to define the concept of artisanal fisheries and of artisanal fishworkers, sharing experiences with other countries.

Promote the recognition by governments of women fishworkers, seaweed and shellfish collectors, vendors and traders, makers of fishing equipment, etc. Ensure that this recognition has an impact on public policies. Ensure the rights of women fishworkers to social security (unemployment insurance and other forms of social security).

The discussions were by no means conclusive. They raised many issues and questions. In all probability, the process represents but one step in what is no doubt a long and continuing process of exploring such issues.

Overall, however, the following broad consensus emerged:

- the work and roles of women within the fisheries and within fishing communities have historically been, and continue to

be, important, though often invisible and undervalued;

- there is a need to valorize the work and labour of women, and to recognize this as an important part of the productive chain within family enterprises. This may involve redefining what is seen as fisheries;
- however, these efforts need to take place within an overall context of strengthening and affirming the

way of life and cultural identity of coastal communities, and on fostering mutual respect between men and women. There is a need to be wary of triggering a divisive conflict within the community;

- women's participation in fishworker organizations should be seen as vital in not just supporting issues important to men. There are issues that are specific to women that need to be addressed too. The role of women should not be seen as complementary, but as an issue in its own right.

Participants agreed to work together on gender issues. A set of proposals for follow-up actions was finalized (see box). The participants also proposed the creation of a group, with representatives from each of the countries present, to see through the implementation of the proposals.

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