

Recasting the Net

A recent workshop of women leaders sought to redefine a gender agenda for sustaining life and livelihood in small-scale fisheries in South Africa

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“Our fishing communities are currently facing a social, economic and environmental crisis. The human rights of our communities, particularly those of young girls and women, are being violated on a daily basis, and we can no longer protect our children or our marine resources under these conditions.”

This was the strong message from 43 women leaders representing 16 small-scale fishing communities gathered at the Women in Fisheries Workshop, held in Lambertsbaai, South Africa, during 16-18 February 2010. While the workshop took its title from the ICSF workshop to be held in Chennai, India, in July 2010, it was most appropriate for the current position of women fishworkers in South Africa. Women living and working in small-scale fisheries in South Africa have been marginalized in the small-scale fisheries policy process, and women at the workshop voiced their demand to government loudly and clearly: “We say to government: you have left us out—go back and recast the policy net to include women in fisheries!”

This was the dominant theme that resonated throughout the two-day workshop as women shared their ‘herstories’ of years of

work in fisheries, and, more recently, of years of activism, fighting for fishers’ rights in the new policy processes in South Africa, standing side by side with their male partners, challenging the marginalization of the small-scale sector within the current model of fisheries production and economic development in coastal villages and towns.

The workshop, facilitated by Masifundise, aimed to provide an opportunity for women to review the history of women in fisheries in South Africa, including the history of women’s work, their roles and their organization and to develop a new ‘gender’ agenda for taking their struggles forward. In the first session women gave oral testimony to the ‘triple shift’ that many of them have worked—as mothers and wives and daughters in their homes, preparing food and doing ‘reproductive’ work, to the roles they have played in the artisanal, small-scale sector, assisting their husbands by preparing bait, mending nets and liaising with marketers, to themselves working in the industrial sector in the processing plants providing ‘productive’ labour. Women realized that their position is unique in that they straddle several different economies: at the household and family level, at the level of the community and local fishery, and often at the level of large-scale production and the market. Women expressed their anger on having been marginalized and how the roles they have played have not been recognized in the new fisheries policy processes that have emerged following the election of the first democratic government in South Africa in 1994.

The women felt that the position of women in fisheries has clearly deteriorated since 1994, and even more so in the last three years. Awareness of discrimination against women as workers in the large, industrial fish processing plants was closely entwined with a growing consciousness of the link between this discrimination and the current exclusion that they are facing from their own male partners and from government in the new fisheries policy process.

This was gradually extended to the links between the extreme levels of gender-based violence that women, especially young women, experience in their communities, the high levels of drug-related violence, and the poaching of marine resources.

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Women actively discussing various issues during the workshop. Women shared their “herstories” of years of working in fisheries

Much of the second day of the workshop was dominated by the sharing of horrific stories of such violence and its impacts on women's daily lives. The women noted that the ethic of caring for one's neighbour and for all the children in the village has disappeared and has, instead, been replaced by what they view as an individualistic, self-protective attitude whereby each person is just trying to survive. The women noted that many women have been forced into sex work and drug work as a means of surviving economically. They identified the current individual, quota-based approach to access rights as a primary contributor to the current crisis. This system has contributed greatly to the breakdown of social ties as it has led to divisions between those fishers who were fortunate to get access rights and those who were left out, despite them having a shared traditional history.

The session in which the women had to reflect on their own organization, and identify the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in how the community-based organization of which they are a part, Coastal Links, has approached gender issues, was a painful one for some of them. Several of the women were very defensive of Coastal Links but others led the way in saying that they felt that they had stood by their male partners during the height of the struggle for recognition but now they had been abandoned by these same male comrades. They decided that the time was right to request Coastal Links to address their demands at the forthcoming Annual General Meeting and they developed a list of issues they would like to put on the agenda.

The workshop was a very significant moment in the history of women in small-scale fisheries in South Africa. At the workshop, women participants forged a new understanding of their own structural position in the political economy of fisheries; they debated on what it meant to say "women want equitable rights in fisheries"; and they grappled with how the existing social division of labour shapes the unique contribution that they make. They emerged from the workshop asserting a more radical vision of development in the small-scale fisheries based on the interconnectedness of life and livelihoods.

This 'recasting' of the women-in-fisheries position was most significant for two reasons: Firstly, it came one week prior to the sitting of the National Policy Task Team where the Draft Small-Scale Fisheries Policy was due to

be finalized. The workshop thus created an opportune moment for the women to develop their position on the draft policy and to give their representative, who is the only woman community representative on the task team, a clear mandate to place their demands on the negotiating table.

But secondly, and most importantly, it created a space for women to grapple with the issue of 'equal rights' which, up until this workshop, had been a demand made but with little understanding of what it would mean in practice. In a context in which men predominate in the harvesting sector, it has often been assumed that 'equal rights' meant that women wanted equal numbers of quotas and to go to sea themselves. On the contrary, the workshop enabled women to give content to the demand for equity, which included a qualitative reassessment of the fisheries management regime as a whole. Women demanded a community-based approach to the sector that moved away from an individual and resource-based approach to a more integrated, holistic approach to the fisheries.

Starting off with rather essentialist notions of women's nurturing role as a product of their biological sex, the participants explored the current development and policy paradigm that is shaping fisheries production. Following an input on using a 'gender lens' to examine development, the women worked in small groups where they shared experiences of how this has impacted them and their communities. The groups then reached a point at which they realized that the interconnectedness that they have with their children, their communities and the age-old extension of the relationship between fishers and the marine environment, has been destroyed by the current fisheries management regime. Challenged to rethink the way they have articulated their demand for equal rights in the dominant fisheries management and development paradigm, the women then began to identify what they believed would need to change in order to restore a nurturing and caring ethic to their communities, in the interaction with their marine environment.

On the last day of the workshop, the women worked in their regional groupings, identifying the actions that they committed to in order to take their agenda forward. This involved a discussion on new spaces that may have opened up for women and the need to develop strategic alliances with men in their organizations as well

"We say to government: you have left us out—go back and recast the policy net to include women in fisheries!"

Women in Fisheries Statement Lambertsbaai, South Africa, 18 February 2010

Our fishing communities are currently facing a life-threatening social, economic and environmental crisis arising from the combined effects of the individual quota system, the closure of the fish processing factories and the lack of effective governance and management of marine resources. This has led to a situation in which we live under constant threat and fear due to violent drug- and poaching-related crimes. The human rights of our communities, particularly those of young girls and women, are being violated on a daily basis, and we can no longer protect our children or our marine resources under these conditions.

Noting

That apartheid affected many black communities that depended on the sea for their livelihoods. However, for many of these communities, their access to marine resources has been further restricted since 1994 through the introduction of the new fishing rights policies, which have been geared towards the big commercial companies and not the values, traditions and customary practices of our small-scale communities;

Noting

That women living and working in traditional fishing communities have historically played a very significant role in the development of the fishing industry in South Africa, as well as in sustaining life and livelihoods in coastal communities; and

That much of the work that women have done in the past, and continue to do in small-scale fishing communities, is not recognized, nor is it regarded as valuable;

Noting

That many women from coastal fishing communities have worked as seasonal workers in the fish processing plants, working long hours under extremely harsh, icy conditions, and most have suffered chronic health problems as a result of this work, with no compensation or adequate health care;

Noting

That many women have lost their male partners and breadwinners at sea, with no

compensation or financial support available to their families;

Noting further

That many mothers and fathers had to work long hours in the fishing industry, and that, in many instances, their children were forced to leave school at an early age and take care of one another. This resulted in low formal education levels in many communities, and has further contributed towards the social and economic hardship experienced in these areas.

Noting therefore

The provisions on Equality in Section 9 of our Constitution, and the provisions contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Agenda 21, the Beijing Platform of Action and the Millennium Development Goals and that the South African government has ratified these international legal instruments,

We strongly assert our right to life, to dignity, to safety and security and to sustainable development.

Noting too, our rights as women to participate equally and effectively in the development of a new small-scale fisheries policy for South Africa and our right to benefit equitably from this policy,

We call on our President Jacob Zuma, on our Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Minister Tina Joemat-Petersen, on our Minister of Environmental Affairs and Water, Minister Sonjica, and on the acting Deputy Director of Marine and Coastal Management, Dr Razeena Omar, to intervene immediately in the crisis facing our fishing communities and our marine resources.

We appeal to our government at all levels to commit to a new small-scale fishing policy that will contribute to the restoration of a community-based approach to the governance of our marine resources, based on an ethic of care in coastal communities, so that we can sustain our communities and our natural resources for the benefit of the generations to come.

as with women in other sectors. It highlighted the need to work at local, provincial and national government levels.

The women identified the need to broaden their advocacy actions which, to date, have focused narrowly on the fisheries department, to include a number of other government departments, most notably those of social development and police and security. This

was in direct response to the recognition that women's right to life, to safety and security and to development was threatened by the current crisis in fishing communities. Most notably, the women voiced their deep concern that they feel that they can no longer protect their children or the marine resources from the violence that is being wrought upon them. This touched at the very heart of women's

sense of their own identities as women, their spiritual connectedness with their marine environment as life affirming and the interconnectedness of community and coast, life and livelihood.

They expressed this powerfully in a statement developed on the last morning of the workshop, in which they urged their

government at all levels *“to commit to a new small scale-fishing policy that will contribute to the restoration of a community-based approach to the governance of our marine resources, based on an ethic of care in coastal communities, so that we can sustain our communities and our natural resources for the benefit of the generations to come”*. ❏

“...to commit to a new small scale-fishing policy that will contribute to the restoration of a community-based approach...”