

## Women in fisheries

## A good start

**At a conference in Canada, women realized they are not alone in sharing the burden of problems in fisheries**

**T**he first Maritime Conference for Women and the Fishery was held in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada on 28 and 29 March 1995. For a first-time effort, the turn-out was encouraging: 65 participants, including women from the three Maritime provinces of Canada as well as representatives from Labrador and the eastern United States.

The conference was organized by a regional committee, formed in the summer of 1994 and made up of women involved in the fishery in the three Maritime Provinces of Canada. This committee was given the mandate to organize a regional conference that would bring together women who are connected with the fishery in various ways: women who fish, women who work in processing, or women who are members of fishing households.

The organizational committee worked in collaboration with two regional organizations, the Cooper Institute of Prince Edward Island and Oxfam-Canada/Project Acadie of New Brunswick. Interestingly, this collaboration between these two Canadian organizations began when two of their representatives met at the ICSF conference in Cebu, Philippines in June 1994.

The Charlottetown conference was a bilingual one. This proved very helpful in allowing the full participation of both Anglophones and Francophones. The objective was to provide a forum to bring together women from various parts of the region so that they could share their experiences, concerns and hopes for the future of the inshore fishery. The conference gave them the opportunity to analyze their contribution to the fishery

and to explore ways to raise the visibility of women in the fishery.

Traditionally, women have worked mostly in the processing industry. Now, increasingly, they are fishing with their husbands, especially in the lobster fishery, which is the main fishery in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

But it is important to note that women contribute in many different ways to the survival of the inshore fishery, whether it be through wages for work outside the home, fishing with their husbands, or through unpaid work in the home such as bookkeeping, preparation of gear and running errands.

For various reasons, there is today a renewed interest in according greater visibility to women in the fishery. One is the fact that more women are working directly in the fishery and, as a result, are interested in sharing their experiences and learning more about the economics and politics of the fishery. Also, in the analysis of the recent crisis in the fishery in the Atlantic, there is a virtual silence about the effect of this crisis on women.

It is true that the crisis in the fishery does not affect all the regions to the same degree. In Newfoundland and some regions of Nova Scotia, for example, the destruction of the groundfishery has had dramatic consequences for fishers and plant workers and for the survival of coastal communities.

**Not all affected**

In other regions, where the lobster fishery is still healthy, fishers have not felt the crisis in the same way. However, the majority of inshore fishers have been affected in some way by the lack of groundfish and they are more conscious

of the fragility of the resource upon which they depend. The increasing dependence on lobster is a big concern as well.

**A**nother trend in the region is a renewed interest in communities having more control over the inshore fisheries. Women have traditionally been very community minded and now they are using their energies to look at survival strategies for fishing communities, which will give more control to the communities themselves and diminish the hold of large companies.

The organizers hoped that, in the long term, conferences such as this will strengthen coastal communities and the organizations of fishers and plant workers.

The two-day conference began with a presentation on the fisheries in the various parts of the region. Ten women gave brief descriptions of the regional fisheries and the work of women in them. These regions were: Eastern PEI, Western PEI, South-west Nova Scotia and Bay St., United States. The presentations gave the participants a sense of both the similarities and differences in the Atlantic region.

In the section of the conference programme billed as 'Women and the Fishery: the present situation, the future, the strengths and challenges', the participants undertook an exercise divided into three stages: an examination

of the current situation, a look into the future, and an identification of the strengths and challenges needed to bridge the gap between the present and the future.

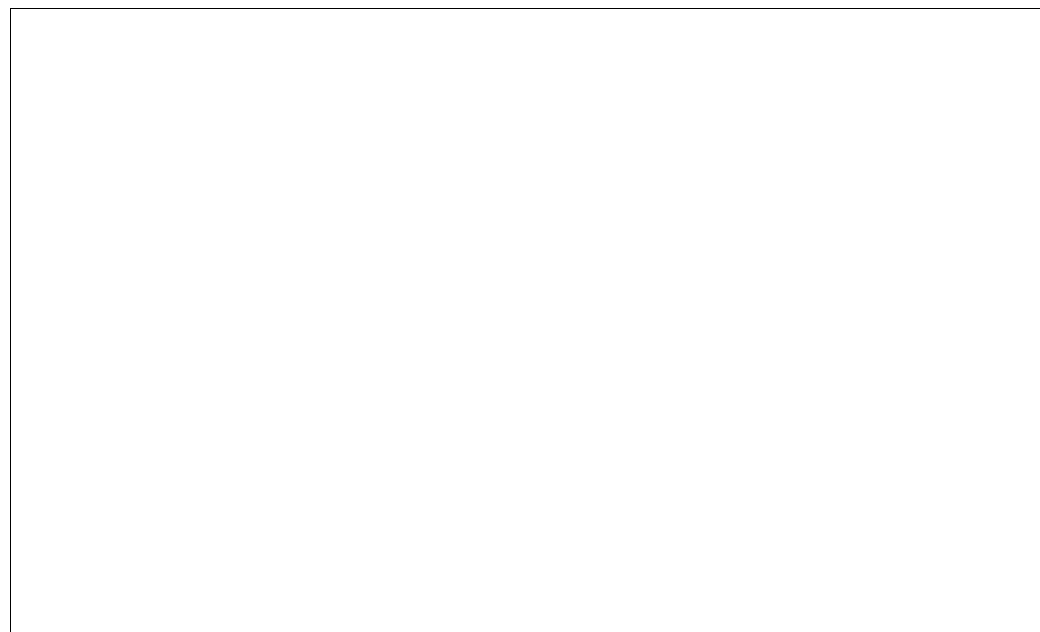
On the current situation, the women split up into small groups to discuss the following questions: What are the changes in the economy of the region, country or family, which affect women in coastal communities? Precisely how are they affected?

The first concern the women expressed was on the changes in the social programmes, in unemployment insurance, in particular. By removing their support from the fishery, which is a seasonal industry, and by reducing benefits to workers, many women wonder if the government is trying to push people out of the fishery and out of the region. "What about our future? Will we end up with ghost fishing villages?" these were the doubts uppermost in their minds.

#### **Non-traditional activities**

When women respond to changes in the economy by taking up non-traditional activities, they often face opposition. Many women felt that they have, at one time or another, faced sexism or discrimination.

This could be at the level of the family (sole responsibility for the care of the house and children, little support for involvement in outside activities), at the community level



(women who fish are not always accepted), in fishing organizations and through government regulations.

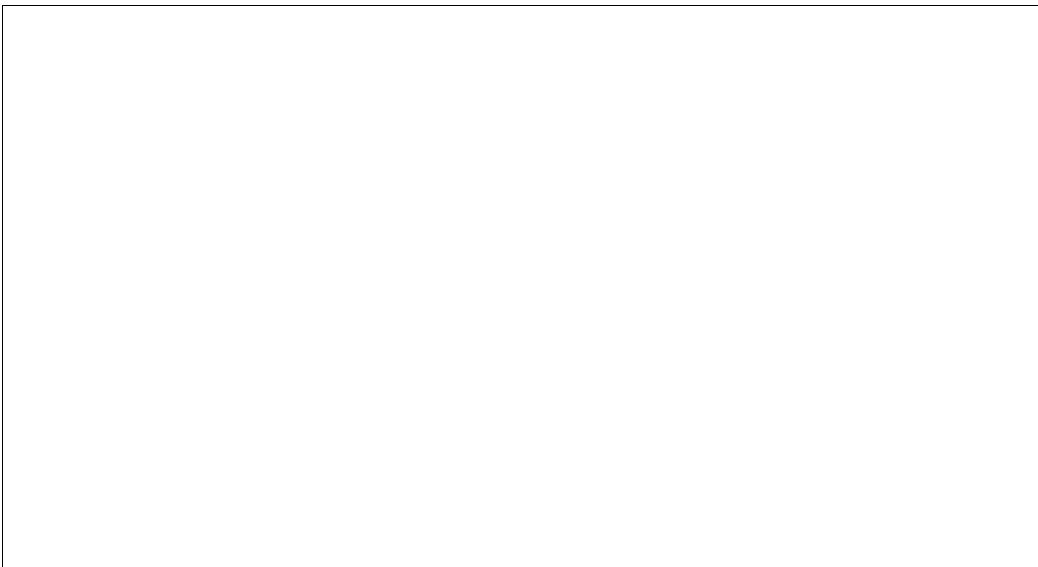
**D**uring the 1980s, women gained the right to collect unemployment insurance even when they were employed by their husbands. Before this, spouses of self-employed workers were not eligible for these benefits. This change in regulations opened the door for many women to get directly involved in fishing. However, many still face discrimination and harassment from official organizations. Often, they have to fight to recover the benefits that have been unjustly robbed from them.

Purely economic goals have resulted in overfishing and the use of destructive technology in the fisheries. These practices have depleted fish stocks,

ones who have to manage the stress both in their family and in the communities.

In the second part of the conference exercise, the women were invited to share their dreams for the future of the fishery and of coastal communities. They yearned for a healthy fishery, managed well by the communities themselves, which would allow them to transmit their values and culture to future generations. They called for an unpolluted environment, and the disappearance of high-tech destructive technology. They want a future where the inshore fishery is not controlled by large companies. They want governments to make decisions in consultation with the coastal communities.

In a world where there is plenty of fish and the processing takes place within fishing communities, there would be work for everyone, all year round, and fishers and



leading to changes in regulations, closure of certain fisheries and fish plants, freezing of licences, and loss of employment and income.

Fishing is a seasonal industry and thus, for its survival, it has been dependent on government support such as unemployment insurance. The cut-backs in the past few years have resulted in a negative image and low self-esteem both for women and for all those involved in seasonal industries like fishing.

The insecurity in the fishery has put more pressure on women who are often the

plant workers could provide for their families without being dependent on unemployment insurance. The women's dreams also included a positive image of fishers, both women and men, which would create pride in coastal communities. They want to be recognized for their contribution and to be accepted as legitimate fisherwomen. They want equity in salaries and rights, and better access to day care and pensions, and the disappearance of family violence.

In the third stage of the conference on the challenges ahead the participants looked at the present situation, on the one hand,

and the world of their dreams, on the other. Working in small groups, they identified the obstacles and the challenges, which make up the gap between these two worlds and also assessed the strengths of women, which would ensure the survival of coastal communities.

**A**mong the main obstacles identified were sexism and a prejudice against the fishing community, which often results in lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Some women expressed a fear of speaking out to defend their rights. Another obstacle is the presence of large companies and international markets which dictate to governments how they should manage the resource. At times, these obstacles lead to a feeling of discouragement in coastal communities, especially for women, and a sense of loss of control over their own lives.

Nonetheless, faced with these obstacles, the women also identified their strengths. They have the ability to listen to their families and their communities, and they know their needs. They feel confident in their role as educators and organizers of their communities. They have proof of their tenacity and courage. They have a sense of reality. They adjust easily to changes and they are very creative in adapting to new situations. They know how to work together for their communities and are expressing their views more and more forcefully.

The conference allowed the women to get a better sense of their situation, of the problems they face and of their strengths. It also helped start a reflection on what women expect for the future of the fishery and of coastal communities. Four themes were selected for discussion by small groups at the workshop on what actions should be taken. The themes were:

- unemployment insurance and government policy;
- changing the image of the fishery;
- fishery and the environment; and
- working in networks and organizations.

Many women who were in the process of having their unemployment insurance claims investigated talked about their cases, sharing experiences and information. The following guidelines emerged from this discussion:

Ask for the rules of eligibility for unemployment insurance to be given in writing. Also, ask for the name of the staff person who gives them out. (The rules are often personal interpretations.)

- Ask the same questions to different staff people and compare their answers.
- Demand that the government clarify the rules and remove the question on the relationship with the employer, since that is discriminating.
- Never answer questions on the telephone. Demand that it be done in writing or before the staff person concerned. When going in person, always take someone along as a witness who will take down notes during the interview.
- Draw up a list of persons (men and women) and groups who can offer support. Ask for support from the fishermen's organizations.
- Gather and distribute information on cases won and lost in order to help those who are facing the same situation.
- If the case is not resolved, do not hesitate to go public with the information.

#### **Pride in the fishery**

The group, which discussed the problem of image stressed the importance of developing, among fishermen and fisherwomen, a pride in the fishery. Even though fishing is a seasonal industry, it is an important economic activity on which many Atlantic communities depend for their survival.

The money generated in the inshore fishery is spent in the local economy. This does not always happen in the case of the industrial fishery. The image of the fishery

also suffers from the crisis of the groundfishery, which has dramatically affected coastal communities in Newfoundland.

However, not all fisheries are in such a critical state. In other parts of the region, there are fisheries in better shape lobster, for example. However, the women stressed the need for vigilance in preserving them.

The group on fishery and the environment prepared a letter to be sent to the UN, which, around the same time, had organized a conference on highly migratory and straddling fish stocks. The letter, later adopted by the whole assembly, demanded that the UN put pressure on member countries to stop the use of destructive fishing gear, and put an end to overfishing.

The group on networking and organizational structures dealt with three points: women's fears of getting involved in organizations, identification of organizations of fishermen and women in each province, and a list of the kinds of activities that the women would be interested in organizing in the future.

These are some of the fears that women have of getting involved in organizations/networks:

- Many women are not used to working in networks and do not feel that their contribution is important. They feel the networks will continue whether they join or not.
- They would rather work more locally. Many women are already quite busy meeting the demands of their families and their communities.
- Some women find it difficult to get away from the house because of household and child-care responsibilities, or lack of support from their husbands.
- They do not have the confidence.
- Many women are nervous about travelling, especially in winter.

The group also identified the organizations of fishermen and women that are presently active in each province:

#### **New Brunswick**

- Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU). Only women who fish with their husbands are eligible for membership. There are very few women active in the MFU.
- Botsford Professional Fishermen's Association. The meetings are open to crew members and to wives of fishermen. Women can be members and at present there are 12 women members.
- Informal community groups organized by Oxfam/Canada/Project Acadie.
- Bay of Fundy. There is very little activity for women. But the two participants from the area are interested in exploring options for organizing on a regional basis.

#### **Nova Scotia**

- Nova Scotia Women's Fishnet. It brings together all women interested in the fishery, whether they are directly involved in fishing or not. They publish a newsletter and are organizing workshops in different areas of the province.
- Eastern Fishermen's Federation (EFF). This is a federation of various associations in the region. It is primarily a men's organization, but there are a few women members.
- Maritime Fishermen's Union. A few women members, but women are not active in the union.
- Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW). They are active in various fish plants in Nova Scotia.
- Coastal Communities Network (CAN). This network brings together various organizations fishers' organizations, municipalities, trade unions, churches, NGOs, universities all the

stakeholders in coastal communities in Nova Scotia.

#### Prince Edward Island

- Women in Support of Fishing. A group of women in Miminegash who have organized to improve the situation of Irish moss harvesters. They have recently formed a co-operative to explore ways of marketing and promoting Irish Moss. The group operates a small cafe and interpretive centre in Miminegash.
- Women and the Fishery. A group of women in Eastern Kings who organize an annual workshop and some other activities for women involved in the fishery.
- PEI Fishermens Association (PEIFA). A member group of EFF. Some women who are wives of fishermen members are active in the organization.

#### Newfoundland and Labrador

- Newfoundland Women's Fishnet. A group similar to NS Womens Fishnet, with some women doing research in fishing communities, and providing a forum for women to come together.
- Fishermen, Food and Allied WorkersCAW, with both fishers and plant workers as members.

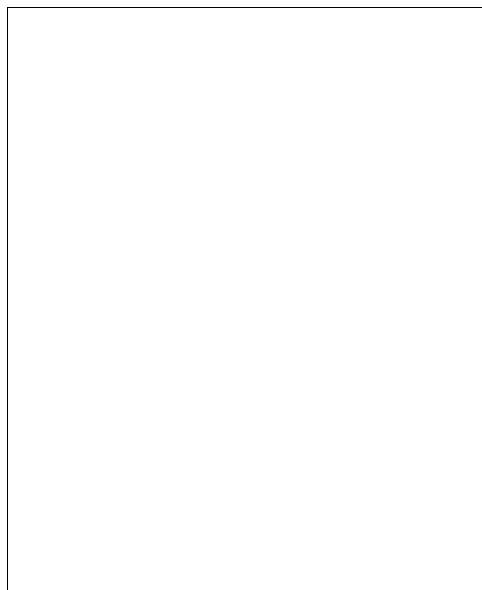
#### Eastern United States

- Groups of Fishermen's Wives
- Women and the Fishery National Networks
- Association of Maritime Women (west coast of us)

#### Quebec-Labrador Foundation

It was observed that, although it might appear that there are plenty of organizations, there are very few women from inshore fishing households involved in them.. The mainstream male organizations have little or no involvement of women.

The conference then focused on the international situation, specifically on



women in the fishery in the countries of the South. Maureen Larkin of the Cooper Institute and Chantal Abord-Hugon of Oxfam-Canada /Project Acadie made a presentation on the situation of women in fishing communities in developing countries.

They showed slides of women in the fishery from various countries in Africa, India and other parts of Asia. These depicted them in harvesting, processing and marketing activities. It was followed by discussion and questions.

Maureen and Chantal shared their experiences of an international conference organized by ICSF in the Philippines in 1994.

It was interesting to note that inshore fishers and coastal communities in the North and the South have many common problems. Some examples: overfishing, conflicts between small-scale fishers and industrial fishery, tourist projects competing for space with inshore fisheries, and the effects of aquaculture on wild fishery.

Also, women face similar challenges such as adjusting to changes in the economy, looking for ways of increasing the family income, dealing with the stress in families due to loss of revenue, family violence and discrimination against women. The conference ended with the women meeting in provincial caucuses. The objective of this session was to discuss the follow-up to this conference. The women

expressed interest in having local and provincial conferences next year and a regional conference every second year. They nominated people from each province to serve as contacts for further information.

**T**he women wished to continue publishing the newsletter that is presently being published by Nova Scotia Women's Fishnet. They agreed to support it by writing articles or paying for subscriptions. This was seen as a good way to maintain contact between the women of coastal communities throughout the Atlantic region.

The participants worked very hard at this conference, although for many it was the first time they were attending a meeting of this sort. But there was also some time for fun. One night the women organized an informal *soirée* where they demonstrated their many artistic talents.

The most important outcome of the conference was the chance to meet other women who were in the same situation. It was a way of breaking down isolation and sharing ideas, hopes and dreams. Many women said they were interested in getting involved at the local level, but they also wished to maintain links with other women in the region.

Thanks to the conference, the women have become more aware that they play an important role in the fishery and in the coastal communities. They realize that they are not alone when they are faced with situations of injustice. They are able to discuss and explore solutions together. In the long term, coastal communities and their organizations will only get strengthened when women participate in decision-making by looking at alternatives for sustainable communities. ♣

This report has been prepared by Maureen Larkin of the Cooper Institute and Chantal Abord-Hugon of Oxfam-Canada/Project Acadie