

## Nova Scotia

**Under stress**

*Woman of Nova Scotian fishing communities are being affected by the individual, family and community break-downs which surround them*  
by Linda Christiansen-Ruffman and Stella Lord

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"I was surprised how stressed women are.... Some of the interviews broke my heart." This community-based researcher had heard from young women depressed by their futures and from women exhausted by work, family and community responsibilities—with only memories of days when their husbands were proud and independent fishermen. She was one of 10 community-based researchers who worked along with our research team on a participatory action research project, conducted in six Nova Scotian coastal communities in 1999-2000.

We heard feelings of despair, anger, grief and hopelessness as well as great courage and strength. Some women talked about the unfairness of fisheries and compensation policies that favour the 'professionalization' of the fishery, large fishing corporations, and environmentally destructive practices, at the expense of a small, sustainable inshore fishery and viable fishing communities. Some women voiced concern about policies that discriminate against women and against rural ways of life. In fact, there are policy proposals where women are expected simply 'to cope'.

Almost all research participants, numbering more than 60 women in all, are being affected by the individual, family and community break-downs which surround them. Some women are having a particularly difficult time because they are dealing with domestic abuse and violence, made worse by the use of alcohol and stress on the family.

Women express feelings of loss of control. Women, who have been the experts in the onshore management of family fishing businesses, are being 'deskilled' by frequent changes in rules governing everything from fishing to taxes. Local women's jobs have evaporated with fish-plant closures, and women are having to take low-paid jobs in towns so they can become family breadwinners. Women's roles in creating strong and viable communities are being eroded by changes in government policies as well as by their overwork and uncertainty about the future. These changes reveal the past importance of women's work in family fishing and in fostering strong, vibrant coastal communities.

The changes also indicate the invisibility or insignificance to urban-based policymakers of social capital and community infrastructure, created by women, and of the women themselves who helped to create it. Although Nova Scotia 'markets' its fishing communities as tourist attractions, authorities seem oblivious to the erosion and growing fragility of the material bases and complex social roots of these communities under current socioeconomic conditions.



Most women said that changes in fishing regulations and social policies (e.g. employment insurance) have not helped but have made the situation worse. These policies have negatively affected the health of women in fishing families, their families and their communities. In effect, we found that current government policies are making people and communities sick.

It is clear how and why so many of these women have a mistrustful 'us and them' attitude toward government decision-makers; they have, for the most part, not been involved in the key decisions which affect their lives. The critical attitude and cynicism expressed toward all aspects of government also show that democracy has failed these communities; women feel they, their families and their communities have been let down, unheard and unfairly treated by the government.

Nevertheless, women in communities have a range of views on solutions and actions. Two communities have already set up volunteer-operated women's centres, and embarked on another project to include local women in community economic development efforts. FishNet has started another project to bring this research to the attention of policymakers.

Historic injustices and discrimination against women persist. Women's hard work in fishing businesses and in building community infrastructure needs to be recognized so that current policies do not destroy the foundations of Nova Scotian communities and the health of its peoples.