

# Women in Fisheries in Africa: 1999–2015

This article discusses the important milestones in the recent history of women in fisheries in several African countries vis-à-vis the role of *Yemaya* over the years

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1999–2000:

Shortly after *Yemaya* was born within ICSF in 1999, it reached the shores of West Africa. Women fishworkers and fishers in Senegal, Guinea Conakry and Gambia greeted the new publication with excitement and expressed their hopes that *Yemaya* would become their “umbilical cord, linking women fishworkers with each other and enabling them to share their concerns and learn from one another” (See *Mariame Kane, M'bour, Senegal, Yemaya Issue 2, 1999*).

From the very first edition of *Yemaya*, it became apparent that women in fisheries on the continent shared common agenda. The agenda linked women who worked and lived within the vibrant, well-established fisheries of the West African region, and women fishers and fish traders on the shores of shared inland lakes of Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi. Exchanges between women in fisheries across West Africa and with women in the Lake Victoria region spread to links with women in France and other parts of the world through *Yemaya*, and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) following the meeting in Loctudy in 1999. The concerns and problems voiced by women in the early pages of *Yemaya* reflected the common situation facing women on

the continent: women’s role in fisheries was largely invisible; they performed a wide range of labour along the value chain and they struggled with poor working conditions; they faced a lack of credit, appropriate technology and infrastructure. Most significantly, strong patriarchal and customary norms prevented them from participating equally in fishworker organizations and making sure that these organizations reflected their political interests. The sharing of strategies was evident early on. For example, when the Katosi Women’s Group from Uganda exchanged ideas with ICSF members and others, they realised that their plans to broaden their activities into fish smoking would not address concerns about the health of the fish resources or the health of their community. Inspired through these exchanges, they took the decision “*We have realized the need to protect the fish resources and the interests of the community and to look not only at the profit nature of the business. Some one has to come out and take over that responsibility, and also to be an example to the community that the fisheries resource if not protected can be depleted. With that in mind we the women have now come up with a way of diversifying our activities. The land is there and not cultivated. We want to utilize the land by growing food so as to reduce the pressure on the lake and our demands for fish. We want to protect the lake taking on the motherly role of nurturing*” (See Margaret Nakato, Uganda, in *Yemaya Issue 5 2000*).

This expression of the nurturing role of women in fisheries took various forms in different countries, but had the overall impact of broadening the focus of fisheries to include issues at the heart of the political economy of fisheries as they impacted local communities: the impact of foreign trade and destructive practices on the lives and livelihoods of communities, on their food security, their health and their development. It shifted the focus from fishworkers to fishing communities as women highlighted the fact that these issues were intertwined and inseparable. It highlighted the links between the steady globalisation of fisheries in Africa and local problems such as child labour and HIV/AIDS.

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**2000-2002:**

During the period 2000-2002 ICSF organized a series of meetings focused on Women in Fisheries (WIF) in the West African region. In 2001, participants from over 13 countries attend the “Workshop on Problems and Prospects for Developing Artisanal Fish Trade in West Africa”, held from 30 May to 1 June 2001. This was followed by the “West African Processed Fish Fair” on 2 and 3 June 2001. The fair was hosted by ICSF in collaboration with the Collectif National des Pecheurs Artisanaux du Senegal (CNPS) and the Centre de Recherches pour le Developpement des Technologies Intermediaires de Pêche (CREDETIP), and included fish processors and traders from several countries in West Africa, including Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Conakry, Ghana, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. They were supported by the FAO-DFID Sustainable Fisheries Livelihood Project (SFLP). The issues emerging from these meetings were highlighted in a series of articles in the *Yemaya*. The common needs of women in the region were apparent: women required access to credit, infrastructure and technological inputs. Yet the focus was not only on technological support, and women articulated very clearly their strategic interests. This had the effect of broadening the political focus of some of the fisher movements. In Senegal for instance, women helped the movement become more politicised and extended the focus to include issues such as the state of the resource and fisheries trade agreements. The participation of women from the region in a range of activities focusing on negotiation of foreign trade agreements steadily gained momentum through the work of organizations such as the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), a partner organization of ICSF.

*Yemaya* articles during these years were centred around issues facing women in West Africa, in the inland lakes such as Lake Victoria and in East and Southeastern African countries such as Tanzania and Mozambique. In 2002, the “World Summit on Sustainable Development” (WSSD) was held in South Africa. Women fishers from South Africa met up with members of the WFFP and WFF, women leaders from Africa and elsewhere at the International Fishers’ Forum hosted by the Masifundise Development Trust (Masifundise). Inspired by the level of organization

elsewhere, the South African women committed to establishing a network of fishing communities. This was the first step on the road to the birth of Coastal Links, now a national network of fishing communities in South Africa.

**2003-2009:**

A workshop was held in Cotonou, Benin in West Africa in December 2003 to throw the spotlight on women in fishing communities. The workshop, titled “*Room to Manoeuvre: Gender and Coping Strategies in the Fisheries Sector*”, was funded by the European Commission and was organized by IDDRA, UK and the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP), based in Cotonou. It brought together 14 participants from Europe (France, Madeira) and Africa (Guinea, the Gambia, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, and Tanzania).

In 2004, women representatives from countries from the Southern African region were able to meet when the Southern African Development Community Small-scale Fisheries Conference was held in South Africa hosted by Masifundise. The issue of women’s rights in small-scale fisheries (SSF) was highlighted at this meeting.

In 2005, the spotlight focused on the Lake Victoria region and the plight of women in inland fisheries. The documentary film “Darwin’s Nightmare” was premiered at the meeting. This film documented the social impacts of the trade in the Nile Perch on communities who depend on Lake Victoria fisheries for their livelihoods; and began a longer debate about ‘sex for fish’ issue in this region.

In the same year, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) hosted the first continent wide conference entitled “Fish For All Conference”. This conference led to the development of the Abuja Declaration which focused on strategic partnerships for fisheries and aquaculture in Africa, including small-scale and artisanal fisheries, but with little specific attention to women.

In 2006, ICSF hosted the workshop titled “Fishing Communities and Sustainable Development in Eastern and Southern Africa: The Role of Small-scale Fisheries” (ESA Fisheries Workshop I), held from 14 to 17 March 2006 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This workshop brought together men and women fishers and fishworkers, and among other issues addressed the issue of women’s

role and rights in fishing communities. The year was a turning point for women from SSF in South Africa as they took the lead in advocacy actions and a campaign declaring that “Fishers Rights = Human Rights”. In December 2006, they embarked on a defiance campaign in order to draw attention to the discrimination that SSF sector faced. This defiance campaign enabled them to secure a victory in the Equality Court in 2007. In May 2007, the Court ordered the Fisheries Minister to develop a new SSF policy that would recognize the rights of small-scale, traditional fishing communities.

In 2008, representatives from fishing communities in the region met in Zanzibar, Tanzania at a workshop titled “Asserting Rights, Defining Responsibilities: Perspectives from Small-scale Fishing Communities on Coastal and Fisheries Management in Eastern and Southern Africa” (ESA Fisheries Workshop II or the Zanzibar Workshop), jointly organized by ICSF, Masifundise, and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), Tanzania, in collaboration with the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). The workshop emphasized and affirmed the rights of women and the issue of gender equity as integral to the struggle for fishers’ rights. It was part of a preparatory process towards the first “FAO SSF Workshop” which was held in Bangkok in October 2008. Women from SSF in West, East and Southern Africa attended this Conference in Bangkok and participated in the development of the Bangkok Statement that calls for recognition of the role of women in fisheries. At this conference it was noted that “The struggle for recognition of women’s roles in small-scale fisheries is linked to the struggle for defending small-scale fisheries itself. They go hand-in-hand; not one or the other; not one after the other.”

This was a sea change for small-scale fisheries, as, following the Bangkok meeting in the following year, the “28th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the FAO” requested FAO to commence with the development of an international instrument on SSF.

#### **2010-2015:**

In 2010, ICSF hosted an international conference on gender and women in fisheries. As part of the preparation for this workshop, ICSF supported the Masifundise

National Women in Fisheries Workshop in South Africa.

During this year, the first ever Conference of African Ministers of Fisheries and Aquaculture (CAMFA 1) was convened in September 2010 in Banjul, The Gambia. The CAMFA was subsequently endorsed by the 18th Session of the African Union Assembly of Heads of State, in 2011, as the policy organ responsible for fisheries and aquaculture, within the Conference of African Ministers of Agriculture (CAMA).

The mobilization of women in fisheries and their increased organization across the continent was evident particularly in West Africa. Several regional workshops held as part of the consultation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Small-scale Fisheries created space for women in organizations to voice their demands. Regional consultations were held as part of the consultation for the development of the SSF Guidelines. A regional workshop representing women from 16 countries hosted by ICSF and African Confederation of Professional Artisanal Fishery Organizations (CAOPA), in Ivory Coast on “The Problems Facing Women Artisanal Fishworkers in the Regional Trade of Fishery Products in West Africa: how should these be addressed by the International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small Scale Fisheries” (IG SSF) resulted in the Abidjan Statement. On the occasion of World Fisheries Day on 21 November 2012 organized at the Abidjan Palace of Culture (Ivory Coast), following a conference on “Improving the Contribution of Artisanal Fisheries to Food Security: The Role of Women”, organized by CAOPA in collaboration with the National Fisheries Federation of Ivory Coast (FENACOPECI), and with the participation of the Journalists’ Network for Responsible Fisheries (REJOPRAO), professional artisanal fishworkers from 16 African countries, and representatives from CFFA, ICSE, FAO, Bread for the World (BftW), and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), the Abidjan Statement highlighting the position of women in fisheries was adopted.

At the state level, the formulation of the Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for African fisheries and aquaculture started in earnest in 2012 following immediately the Executive Council Decisions (Doc. EX. CL /627(XVIII)) by the African Heads of States and Governments that adopted the Recommendations of the First Conference

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of Ministers of Fisheries and Aquaculture (CAMFA). A broad-based and inclusive Think Tank Meeting was held in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire in June 2012. The meeting brought together representatives of national fisheries and aquaculture departments, associations of small-scale and industrial fisheries and aquaculture, fish processors and exporters, including representative stakeholders from over 25 regional and international institutions. Women from Africa participated in the final negotiations of the SSF Guidelines in 2014, and in the same year the African Union NEPAD Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa was developed.

Yet despite these signs of change, the hopes that *Yemaya* would be a life-giving link for women in fisheries and would help to forge an alternative, nurturing approach to fisheries remain as yet incomplete in the light of the current status of women and of fisheries in the continent. Women in Africa continue to face extremely high levels of poverty, food insecurity and inequity. Although there are positive signs from some countries that women are participating in community-based programmes such as the octopus recovery programmes in Tanzania and the establishment of local community managed marine reserves in Tanzania, Kenya and Madagascar, the problems and challenges facing women remain. In the context of the SSF Guidelines, there is a great deal of work to be done to ensure that women are aware of their rights and that men and women are empowered to challenge gender discrimination. Most worrying however, is the dominance of a neo-liberal development agenda that regards Africa's oceans and her women as 'untapped wealth'. Women in fisheries struggling to mobilise around their access to marine resources for their livelihood now face the grossly unequal power relations inherent in the 'blue economy'.

The crude wealth-based approach to fisheries that has become evident in many of the NEPAD country fisheries policies was given a boost recently by the Chairwoman of the 54 member African Union (AU), Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, when she announced to the world that Africa had a "two pronged weapon in its race to industrialise and make use of its natural resources: women and oceans". The AU Chairwoman made this speech with its unfortunate militaristic terminology for the "1<sup>st</sup> Continental Conference on the Empowerment of African Women in Maritime" held in Luanda, Angola in March. The agenda covered how women can best make inroads into areas including shipping and maritime transport, fishing, offshore mining and other aspects of the "blue economy". The Conference theme, "African Maritime Women: Towards Africa's Blue Economy (2050 Aim Strategy / Agenda 2063)", is also in line with the Theme of the African Union for this year which is the "Year of Women's Empowerment and Development Towards Africa's Agenda 2063". Also, March 8 or International Women's Day has become an annual event for the women members of CAOPA to come together. This year they celebrated International Women's Day in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and were joined by the African Union (Inter-African Office for Animal Resources). Women in fisheries in Africa face huge challenges in the coming years: how to use the visibility of their labour that ironically the social development goals of this neo-liberal approach provide; and to use their 'empowerment' to become a powerful political force that can advocate for a nurturing approach to development in general, in direct opposition to the exploitative neo-liberal agenda. The need for *Yemaya* as an umbilical cord that can link them and nurture this alternative political force appears as necessary as ever. ❏