

Cut adrift

The MSC initiative can be criticised from the perspective of fishery-dependent women of the North

Women should come together as one and not leave the decision-making and planning to the men... If women made some of the decisions, there would be more employment and better programmes in place for women in rural communities.

—a Newfoundland fisherwoman

Throughout the world, the relationships of men and women to fisheries resources, work and wealth differ. Although important cultural and class differences exist, women depend on those resources for food, work, income and identity. Yet they tend to have less control than men over these resources and the associated wealth.

Despite these realities, initiatives in fisheries management and fisheries conservation are rarely scrutinized for their potential impacts on women. The proposal for a Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) developed by the environmental transnational, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and the giant corporate transnational, Unilever, shares this weakness.

The assumptions upon which it is based are flawed, and there are ways in which it might negatively impact women of the North (and South) and, indeed, the fish stocks themselves.

The proposed MSC will consist of an appointed team of 'experts' who will certify fisheries as sustainable and then encourage seafood companies to join groups of sustainable buyers, purchase fish only from these sources, and market such fish with an ecolabel. Consumer demand will presumably provide the major incentive for corporations and, ultimately, governments to participate in

the process of developing sustainable fisheries.

At first glance, the MSC proposal might be interpreted as a feminist initiative. Due to their continued responsibility for shopping, food production and service in the home, the MSC proposal appears to position women so that they could have an unprecedented impact on the fate of the world's fishery resources. Guided by expert advice and progressive corporate initiatives, women's choices could restructure the world's fisheries in the direction of sustainability.

However, there are some things wrong with this picture. There is definitely a need for greater public scrutiny of fisheries management and corporate behaviour within the fisheries sector. One way to achieve such scrutiny is through consumer education. However, education is only one factor that influences consumption.

The MSC picture ignores the complex realities of women's consumption work, its diversity and the differing places they occupy in fish product markets. For example, women in different parts of the world consume different fish products, in different contexts, and they acquire these resources in different ways.

Rich women and poor women, urban women and women in fishery-dependent communities do not all consume fish in the same manner. One way to scrutinize the implications of the proposed MSC, then, is to examine its potential impacts on access to fish for consumption among these different groups of women.

Ecolabelling

It seems probable that women of the North (and in South-east Asia) will be

more likely to consume fish that is ecolabelled than women of the South. I say this because ecolabelling will do nothing to reduce the cost of fish and might actually increase its cost—already a barrier for women of the South and poor women of the North.

This will happen also because women of the North, particularly urban, wealthy women, are more likely to consume processed fish purchased in large supermarkets, where packaging and labelling exist.

If, as John Kurien has suggested (*Samudra* 15), ecolabelling actually promotes the export of fish products by fuelling consumer demand in a context of resource scarcity, women consumers in the North could unknowingly contribute to reduced food self-sufficiency and reduced economic power among women in the South as well as among women in fishery-dependent regions in the North.

In his article promoting the MSC (*Samudra* 15), Michael Sutton argues that the MSC will put the market in the lead and “where the market leads, governments will likely follow.” In the North, the emphasis on fish exports is being combined with the introduction of management initiatives like Individual Transferable Quotas. These moves are drastically limiting the access of men, and particularly women, in fishery-

dependent communities to those fish resources that remain. The combined impact of these initiatives and the increase in exports of fish seems to arise from the growing political commitment to the export markets and those who depend upon them, and the declining commitment to those in fishery regions who experience the cumulative effects of displacement from the industry and loss of access to fish for subsistence.

Women and men need to carefully scrutinize Sutton’s endorsement of the claim that “markets are replacing our democratic institutions as the key determinant in our society.” While this may be happening, it is not something that we should necessarily support.

As argued by Czerny, Swift and Clarke, in *Getting Started on Social Analysis in Canada*, if the market is a democracy, it is a democracy in which some have more votes than others, and in which, although consumers can vote, they have little control over who or what they vote for. Poor women are particularly powerless, partly because they have few votes in the marketplace.

Food conglomerates

Vertically integrated food conglomerates are increasingly the primary consumers of fish products. These conglomerates actually have the most votes in the marketplace for fish products. When we

recognize that the producers are often also the consumers, what does this tell us about the MSC initiative?

Particularly in the North, *fish* is often consumed in restaurants and fast food outlets or in the form of products whose growth has been enhanced by the use of fishmeal and fish oils. A company might commit itself to use only fish from certified harvesting sectors, but will the ecolabelling process follow this fish from the vessel through processing, manufacturing, preparation and service to the consumer?

For example, will restaurants be certified? Will meat products grown using fish oil from sustainable fisheries be labelled at the counter or at the restaurant table? If they are, how will the validity of this certification be ensured? Who will police the corporations and how will they do this? At what cost? Are there other ways to spend this money that might be more effective at promoting sustainable fisheries? Why not ask some women what they think?

If, in our proposals for sustainable fisheries, we do not include differences in voting power within the market and differences in control over products available for purchase, we could end up blaming stock collapses on consumers. The most probable target would be those increasing numbers of poor consumers, primarily women, whose purchases are dictated by low incomes and who, therefore, can not always afford to distinguish between fish products on the basis of ecolabelling.

This blame would be misplaced because it overstates the power of these women and also because it ignores the reality that the poor (both in the North and the South) consume relatively little protein compared to the rich, and the protein they consume is more likely to be a by-product of protein production for the wealthy than the primary source of demand. In a world where wild fish resources (like other natural resources) are limited, the problem is not just what fish we eat, but also how much we eat and in what form.

A full discussion of the implications of the proposed MSC for women of the North

needs to look not only at women as consumers of fish products, but also at women who depend on fishery resources for employment, culture and community. The household basis of fisheries in Atlantic Canada, Norway and many other parts of the North is well documented. Women contribute directly to these fisheries as workers, organizers and managers, in fishery households, industries and communities. They have fishery knowledge and skills, and depend on fish resources and industries for their livelihoods and, to some extent, for self-sufficiency in food,

The moratoriums on groundfish in Atlantic Canada have demonstrated the profoundly negative impacts resource degradation can have on these women. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the area of Atlantic Canada hardest hit by the collapse of the cod stocks, about 12,000 women lost jobs in the industry. The crisis also affected women doing unpaid work in their husbands' fishing enterprises, such as bookkeeping, supplying and cooking for crews.

Other women lost work in child care and the retail sector in fishery-dependent communities. In addition, out migration and government cutbacks are reducing the number of women employed in education, health and social services. As workers, wives and mothers who are rooted in their local communities, these women have a vested interest in sustainable fisheries.

When looked at from the perspective of these and other fishery-dependent women of the North, the underlying assumptions of Sutton's arguments for an MSC are extremely problematic. Sutton is correct in his argument that global fish stocks are in trouble.

Indefensible

However, his explanation for these problems is more difficult to defend. He implies that the cause of these problems, particularly in the North, is too much democracy: governments have been unwilling to take the decisions necessary to prevent overfishing, due to political pressure from a fishing industry driven to use up resources and destroy itself. Women in fishery communities do not

seem to share this perception that the roots of resource degradation lie in *too much* democracy.

In the case of Atlantic Canada and Norway, for example, they feel that decisions about the fishery, past and present, have been made by people who are not familiar with the strengths and needs of rural communities and, more specifically, with the needs of women. They also feel that without the knowledge and the support of local people, development efforts as well as initiatives to create sustainable fisheries will not succeed.

If Sutton's diagnosis of the causes of global overfishing is incorrect, so is his solution. There is no guarantee that the proposed MSC will remove politics from fisheries management. The process of defining 'expertise' has political dimensions, as does the process of defining sustainable fishing. In his book *Fishing for Truth*, for example, Finlayson has shown that data from small-scale fishers were underutilized by fisheries scientists in Newfoundland, Canada because of dissimilarities in the rules, norms and language of these fishers and those of scientists.

Elsewhere, I have shown how latent biases towards the offshore trawler fishery in the science of stock assessment in Newfoundland became evident when

this science was examined from the perspective of small-scale, inshore fishers. I have also argued that small-scale fishers' knowledge poses problems for fisheries science and management that are similar to those posed by the ecosystem itself. This is, perhaps, even more true of the knowledge of fishery-dependent women.

If the expertise of male fishers is marginalized within fisheries science and management enterprises in the countries of the North, that of female fishers and fishworkers is excluded.

Women in fishery households must bridge the growing gap between the costs of fishing and the value of landings that occur when resources are mismanaged. Women processing workers get less work.

However, when these women attempt to draw upon their knowledge and experience to influence fisheries policy, as happened in Norway during the cod moratorium, the integrative nature of that knowledge (rooted in links between ecology, household, work, markets and communities) makes it difficult for managers to grasp.

Objective knowledge?

As argued by Siri Gerrard, the perception that such knowledge represents particular interests, whereas scientific knowledge is objective, contributes to this marginalization by according science a

greater power. In Sutton's account, fisheries-dependent women are not explicitly identified among the stakeholders whom the MSC could consult in formulating its standards and principles for sustainable fishing. Shifting decisions on fisheries management from elected governments to an MSC with no clear accountability to fishery communities will augment existing limits on democracy located in the political sphere and in the market, and further erode women's power. In so doing, it will undermine the potential for sustainable fisheries.

The marginalization of women's knowledge and experience will persist despite women's continued responsibility for child care, which may enhance their commitment to ensuring that resources are managed in such a way as to protect future generations—one requirement for sustainable development.

A second requirement for sustainability that is not explicitly identified in the MSC proposal is the need to reduce inequities, including gender-related ones, within the current generation. James Boyce has outlined the "intimate ties between environmental degradation and the distribution of wealth and power. Economic inequities and not too much democracy are primarily responsible for overfishing in countries of the North and the South. The wealthy tend to benefit more than the poor from overfishing and the willingness to pay the costs associated with sustainable fishing is constrained by the ability to pay.

In politics and in the market, wealth speaks louder than poverty. In Canada, cuts to social and other programmes designed to redistribute wealth from wealthy to poorer, fishery-dependent areas of the country, and from men to women, are exacerbating economic inequities at the same time as those vulnerable to these cuts are reeling from the effects of resource degradation.

An initiative like the MSC that proposes to create sustainable fisheries without addressing these deepening economic inequities will not be effective. As women tend to be poorer than men, and exercise less control over natural resources and

within politics, it is probable that they will suffer most from this failure.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the potential negative impacts of the MSC will be offset by gains in fishery sustainability. Ecolabelling could, ironically, undermine the sustainability of precisely those fisheries it identifies as adequately managed.

There are a number of reasons for believing this might be the case. The collapse of the groundfish stocks of Atlantic Canada has shown that there is enormous scientific uncertainty regarding the dynamics and status of wild fish stocks.

In addition, most commercial stocks are already overexploited; there is an arsenal of underutilized fishing vessels available to target those stocks for which there is a strong demand; and the national and international mechanisms for preventing the diversion of fishing effort from one fishery to another are extremely weak.

Defining some fisheries as sustainable and promoting the market for them will prompt increased pressure on those stocks. Not only will this be difficult to control but the effects of it will also be difficult to monitor.

Prize or death sentence?

In short, winning the ecolabel prize could be the equivalent of a death sentence for those fisheries and for the communities that depend upon them. **3**

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