

Europe/Norway

Women, men and fishing quotas

The professionalization of the coastal fishing fleet and the introduction of fish quotas have further marginalized women in the fishing industry of Norway

by Siri Gerrard of the Department of Planning and Community Studies, University of Tromsø, Norway

In most Western industrialized countries, fishing is considered a male profession; for, in most cases, both fishers and fishing boatowners are men. Yet, the existence and contributions of female fishers are not in doubt; feminist researchers, particularly, have documented women's fishing-related activities that ensure good harvest and the viability of fishing households in many communities. A continuing feature of these female activities is that they are mostly supportive of fishermen's activities, and remain unpaid, unregistered, unrecognized and invisible outside local communities. Unseen work is generally uncoun- ted, unrewarded and outside the realm of public planning and action; in Norway and other Nordic welfare countries, social rights and opportunities are connected exclusively to paid and statistically visible work. Thus, cases abound of mismatch between fisherwomen's work and their public welfare rights, such as sickness allowance, wages, and unemployment and pension benefits.

The introduction of the fishing quota system in 1990, following a nine-and-half month cod moratorium in the northern part of Norway, has had tremendous impact on the livelihoods of fisherfolk. In this article, I intend to focus on the gender dimension of this quota system.

Before addressing the relationship between gender and fishing quotas, it is perhaps important to begin with an outline of gender distribution in the Norwegian fishing industry. In 2004, while 281 women and 12,396 men were registered as full-time fishers, 114 women and 2,795 men were fishing on part-time basis. In 1990, there were 554 women and 19,921 men as full-time fishers, and 112 women and 6,931

men as part-time fishers. In a sense, while the number of full-time women fishers decreased by 50 per cent, there was stability in the population of part-time fishers. Full-time male fishers decreased by nearly 38 per cent in relation to an almost 60 per cent decrease in part-time male fishers. Several reasons could be adduced for these downward trends. But there seems to be a direct correlation between the quota system and the number of fishers; the women and/or men, who have left the fishing, were not replaced.

Since the quota system was introduced, the quantity of fish landed has varied from year to year. For 2006, the total allowable catch (TAC) of cod was 240,000 tonnes. Such TAC is shared among the coastal fleet and the ocean-going boats according to a fixed percentage, which is often challenged, especially by the coastal fishers.

Norway operates a system of non-transferable boat quotas. This means that quotas cannot be sold; fishing quotas follow the boat. Full-time fishers, who have been registered for a year or more, can buy a boat with a quota that belongs to a category referred to as Group 1. Part-time fishers too can buy boats in Group 2. Since the available fish for the entire fleet in Group 2 is fixed, fishers are required to cease fishing when they exhaust their quotas, unless they live in the most fishery-dependent areas of Tromsø and Finnmark in northern Norway. In principle, the quantity of fish available to boats in Group 2 is less than in Group 1.



In 1990, when the quota system was introduced, boats in Group 1 had quotas for cod, haddock and saithe, the most valuable fish species in northern Norway. The length of fishing boats was also relevant in deciding the size of the quota. This model has since been changed; registered full-time fishers can now simultaneously buy and own several boats with quotas. They can also rent a quota or a boat with a quota, and rent out a quota or a boat with a quota. In both 2005 and 2006, boats smaller than 10 m in Group 1 were able to harvest more cod in relation to boats between 10 m and 15 m in size. The reason is that many boats in Group 1, smaller than 10 m, were scrapped. Quotas of such scrapped boats were then transferred to the remaining similar-sized boats in Group 1.

Since fishing quotas are related to boat ownership, gender is a relevant tool for comparison.

In 2005, throughout Norway, 161 women and 7,386 men were registered as owning boats smaller than 28 m, with an owner share of more than 49.99 per cent. In Group 1, women owned 11 of the registered boats, compared to 2,417 boats for men.

It is particularly interesting to compare the data trend with previous years. In 1994, 192 boats out of a total of 16,216 were registered in the name of women. Fifteen boats with quotas were registered in the name of full-time female fishers, compared to 3,382 for men, while 148 women and 3,774 men owned boats with quotas in Group 2.

Furthermore, from 1994 to 2005, there was an absolute decrease in boat-owning women and men in both Groups 1 and 2. In terms of percentage, however, the decrease in male owners was considerably higher. Also, the heavy gender imbalance in ownership of boats and quotas persisted. The right to fish, which, before 1990, was open to both women and men, has now practically become men's preserve. These findings clearly indicate that women own and control a limited share of fishing quotas in Norway, a country that is otherwise considered a symbol of gender equality.

Many mutually reinforcing reasons possibly underlie these glaring gender imbalances. But I will propose

only a couple of assumptions or hypotheses for further discussion or research:

- The price of boats increased when male fishers started buying boats with quotas, creating difficulties for both new male and female fishers.
- Lack of experience and capital poses problems for potential female fishers.
- The quota system has strengthened male dominance in fishing.
- Both gender neutrality and insensitivity in fishery policy have undermined women's ability to buy, own and register boats, and their general involvement in fishing.

In sum, women, who perform unpaid fishing-related tasks are hardly recognized and registered as fishers. There are also indications that the 'market', 'advanced technology' and male fishers have taken over most of women's practical tasks. This is particularly evident in cases where fishers have converted privately owned boats and quotas into private limited companies - a fairly recent ownership model for small-scale fishing boats in northern Norway. Few of these limited-liability companies related to boats below 15 m in size, have women on their governing boards. In cases where women have fisher-husbands, they still continue as discussion partners, motivators and in other statistically invisible roles, which clearly represent work without any formal rights and benefits.

These tendencies show that professionalization of the coastal fishing fleet and the commodification of fishing rights through the quota system, have not benefited women. I agree thus with researchers who hold the view that the quota system reflects a hegemonic model, which is reminiscent of the "recent international neoliberal consensus". This model advocates a market-based restructuring of economic and environmental policies, as well as the medium of social communication and life. In countries where the quota system has been adopted, there have been serious consequences not only for female fishers and fishing-related women, but also for male fishers, whose numbers are showing a heavy decrease.

Siri Gerrard can be contacted at sirig@sv.uit.no