

**FROM AFRICA/ Cameroon****Adapting to change**

*Women fishworkers in Kribi undertake a diversity of tasks within the fisheries*

**by Florence Palla, an environmentalist-researcher and a member of DEC (Defence of the Environment in Cameroon)**

Kribi is a thriving artisanal fishing community in Cameroon, still socially organized on an ancestral model, where artisanal fishing is seen more as a traditional activity requiring courage than an economic activity. It's a whole culture!

However, the fisheries have seen major changes over the last 15 to 20 years. Motorization of pirogues is common now, given the increasing distance to be covered to reach the resource.

To give some idea, while earlier, women used to fish for shorter periods twice a day, they now fish only once a day, since they need to travel a longer distance and have to compete with the men for the same resource. The situation is similar in the case of the *Londji* fishermen. Whereas earlier they used to make daily trips for a distance of two to three kms to fish, they now spend two to three days at sea, covering distances of more than 20 kms. They have to compete with trawlers targeting the same species on the same grounds. *Mboua manga* fishermen now travel 80 kms, compared to the four kms they were used to covering earlier during daily trips.

In this changing scenario, women continue to play a vital role in fisheries as the 'intermediaries' between fishermen and consumers. In Kribi, few women are fishing because, in general, catching fish is considered a man's job. The fishing techniques used by women are traps or gates to catch shrimps, small-mesh nets (for small fish) and pots (for small lobsters).

One can really feel the presence of women in the fisheries when pirogues arrive on the landing sites. Women are the main buyers. Despite the fact that they come from different backgrounds (fishmongers, housewives, women fish processors, women working for restaurants, etc), there is a tendency amongst them, more than amongst the men, to come together as a group.

Fish processing is the main activity of the majority of women. This is a way to preserve excess of fish caught and also to guarantee an income to cover the basic needs of the family. Fish is cleaned, then salted and smoked on an oven for one or two days. A lot of care is required to ensure that the fish is smoked just right.

As the smoking operation requires long working hours, many women are not interested. They prefer the fresh-fish trade, including that of selling live shrimp. The latter is a speciality of women from the Lobé falls area who, after catching shrimps in traps, keep them alive in 'fish ponds' made of sheet metal driven into the mud. A big problem, however, is the otters that often come to these ponds to feed. The women have evolved a system to protect their catch against these predatory otters.

One of the biggest problems women fishworkers face is the lack of access to credit, especially for fish processing activities. To give credit, banks require a market study to indicate the viability of the enterprise. However, this is difficult because the market is often local and several women practice the same activity in competition with one another.

Another difficulty relates to fish supply during periods when the resource is scarce and/or the price high. This can seriously bring down the daily or monthly income of the women.

Also, to smoke fish, women need ovens. Kribi has only one oven, donated by FAO. This has been built in the 'village chief quarter'. This makes it difficult for women to engage freely in their processing activity. Moreover, there are no ice-boxes or freezers, so the women have to rent these from ice producers or other traders.

In some areas, like *Londji*, women do not smoke fish anymore because of the scarcity of the resource. Priority is given to direct trade in fresh fish. This lack of activity for women is badly resented in an area where some families comprise two women and 13 children.

With the main aim of accessing credit, women have organized into two groups (GIEs) in the urban zone of Kribi: Adamacam (Batangas ethnic group) and Mabeto (Mabea ethnic group). Adamacam is a group of women involved in the buying, smoking and selling of fish,

while Mabeto is a group of women involved in fishing for shrimp in the area of the Lobé falls.

While the existence of these groups facilitates task-sharing among members, women meet with a lot of difficulties in their relations with men, mainly due to cultural barriers. For example, it is not accepted for women to express themselves in public.

Women getting together to access credit can be beneficial since it diminishes competition among women from the same communities. However, in some cases, women still do not see this side of things. They view the organization only as a way to access credit, which is unfortunate. It is important that women understand that better organization (not only for credit) is in their long-term interest.