

Africa/ Tanzania

Women are Capable

Participation of women in the planning stages of fishery projects along the coastal region of Tanzania, has led to the success of these projects

This piece, by Catherine Chando, is based on her Master's thesis titled *Gender Roles in Fishery Planning and Projects: A case study of coastal region in Tanzania* completed in 2002

As a civil servant working in the fisheries bureaucracy and as a Master's student in fisheries management, I have often wondered why women's position in fisheries seems to be so important within the household economy and so marginal in fisheries politics. Their contributions to industry output are poorly registered and recognized. Women have been identified as producers, assistants to fishermen, processors—predominantly involved in post-harvest activities—traders, and prominent actors in activities that are not directly related to fisheries but are essential for family and community welfare. However, the focus on the work of men very often overshadows the economic role of women in fishing communities. This leads to a relative neglect of their needs and interests. Fisheries policies and programmes have, as a consequence, focused mainly on the needs and interests of men, ignoring the fact that women are engaged in fisheries.

Interested as I am in gender aspects of fisheries, I wanted to take a closer look at women's participation in project planning. I consider such participation as an important aspect of women's empowerment. Participation in the planning process gives women an opportunity to influence aims and strategies and to discuss different alternatives given their situation.

This article focuses on the roles played by women in the planning of fisheries projects in the coastal region of Tanzania, more specifically in the districts of Bagamoyo and Mafia.

I visited some fisheries projects in the Bagamoyo area and in Mafia Island. In the Bagamoyo projects, both women and men were not involved in the planning process; the projects were initiated and planned from outside—by the staff of the fisheries department, the community development officer, or by a seaweed farming company—so I will leave out this example.

The project in Mafia Island Marine Park (MIMP) represents, in many ways, a contrast to many projects I know. At Mafia women are now engaged in seaweed farming, factory work and shell collection. In this way they have shown that it is possible to find alternatives to the dynamite fishing that male fishers had been engaged in, almost ruining fish stocks in the process. The government and communities have worked together to counter the practice of dynamiting and to safeguard biodiversity.

The big difference here was women's involvement in the planning process. From the very beginning the ideology and the structure of the project included women. They were included at the national level when planning for the Park was initiated. When the plans for the Park were elaborated, they were members of the staff and were represented in committees and boards. In addition, there were also positions in the village that favoured women, for example, development officers and gender officer. Women were also called upon as community members to participate in the planning meetings initiated in each village.

Involvement in planning does not mean that all women participate. But it gives them a chance to come up with their priorities and strategies at an early stage. If they want to, they can use this opportunity in their favour. This means that women's inclusion from the very beginning of a project is of great importance.

The example from Mafia shows that, through a project, women in fishing communities can play an important role in sustainable management of resources. The projects at Mafia managed to mobilize women; they were leaders of the groups and they were active participants. The success in stopping the practice of dynamiting could also be due to women's involvement in meetings planning for the establishment of the park—one could say that discussion /planning started at the household level. This was a positive outcome in the villages of Jibondo and Juani in Mafia.

A closer observation of women's participation shows that women were more active and easier to mobilize in the projects compared to the men, and that a majority of the groups comprised women.

I also observed that:

- Women were participating in income generating activities outside fisheries and were contributing to their family incomes from the profits coming out of their group activities.
- Women, and some men, acquired and developed skills, particularly in conservation, by practicing seaweed farming.
- Women from villages in the two districts studied, exerted some influence on women's groups in neighbouring villages directly benefited by these projects.
- The women, having gained a better socio-economic status, found it easier to share their own experiences and learnings with the rest of the women and men. They thus motivated others, particularly men, to participate in group activities.

Lesson learned and recommendations

When women participated from day one in formulating the aims of the project—including, for example, increasing women's incomes, enabling them to make a better living, especially for their households—they managed to create a female orientation already in the planning phase. This female orientation seems to have impacted on the implementation and the activities carried out under the project, which in some cases also resulted in social change.

My findings also showed that there were an interrelation between participation in the planning process and level of education. At Mafia many women had comparatively higher levels of education.

The Mafia projects gave women experience in project planning, decision-making and in collaborating with external partners. In this way they have obtained knowledge and skills that might not only give them better economic living conditions, but also enable them to take care of their fisheries resources in a better way. They have also developed skills that can enable them to initiate new projects and take control over their own lives.

The fact that women are able to plan their own projects, therefore, seems to be an important factor that empowers women. The best results were seen in Mafia where women were brought into planning positions. Women held job positions aimed at assisting women to progress. The organizational structure of the Mafia Island Marine Park (MIMP), for example, created

chances for women to be present at all phases of planning and implementation. The position of the gender officer at the park created a greater awareness, and men in the island were able to accept the mobility of their wives beyond their households, in a context where, given the prevailing Arabic culture, women tend to be confined to the household.

My experience from Mafia area is that if women are more involved in planning and leadership, problems of both women and men of many fishing communities can be solved.

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