

Africa/ Mozambique

Where they cannot go

Women in the fisheries of Mozambique feel left behind, both by their men and their government, as fish resources continue to evade their present catching capacity

By **KG Kumar**

The East African nation of Mozambique, which lies between Tanzania and South Africa, boasts a 2,770-km coastline along the Indian Ocean and an Exclusive Economic Zone of 493,700 sq km. The FAO estimates the country's coastal area to be 738,030 sq km. Of the 110 districts in the country, 42 are coastal, covering 23 per cent of the total surface area.

Given these conditions, it is but natural that the fisheries sector plays an important role in Mozambique's economy. It contributes to three per cent of GDP and has lately been accounting for nearly half the country's total foreign exchange earnings. About 85 per cent of Mozambique's exports by value (mainly to the European Union, Japan and South Africa) come from industrial, shallow-water shrimp fisheries. Mozambique is one of the world's poorest countries, with 70 per cent of the 16 million population living below the poverty line, mostly (80 per cent) in rural areas. About half the total protein intake of the population is estimated to come from fish.

The FAO estimates that much of the country's marine resources remain underexploited, and that Mozambique uses only about 25 per cent of its exploitable fish resources. Marine fisheries provide for more than 90 per cent of the jobs in the sector. About 90,000 people are involved directly in fishing, processing and marketing. In 1999, there were about 74,000 fishers practising marine artisanal fisheries, using 11,000–12,000 vessels, mostly operating from about 700 fishing centres. In addition, there are about 19,000 fishworkers who collect fish along the shoreline. But where are the women in Mozambican fisheries? While many women work in agriculture, there are cases of women involved in fishing for food, and in some cases, for sale, as in the community of Mitubane in Angoche district of Nampula province. The women who do fish, use low-cost fine-meshed nets (called *kinias*) in estuarine areas and inshore waters, mainly to catch fish for home consumption.

In some areas they are also involved in post-harvest activities, like drying, salting and smoking small pelagics. Male traders sometimes hire women to process the catch. There are also a few women who trade in processed fish. However, lack of capital and transportation facilities is a major constraint.

These problems became more than evident in a brief interaction with some of the women from the Maputo region who had come to participate at ICSF's General Body Meeting at Maputo in early June. One of them, Maria Fernando Dgambo from Costa do Sol, said that while she does go out to fish using nets, her activity is not socially approved, and so she has often thought of giving it up. Maria says that she and other women sell the men's catch as fresh fish, and they are not much involved in post-harvest processing. Though she does want to continue fishing, lack of money is the single most important constraint. Maria says she does not know where to get credit to fund her small-scale fishing or which agency to approach. Though the men have participated in meetings with government organizations, little has been done in practical terms to address the problem of credit.

Contrast Maria's experience with that of 24-year old Leenos, a hook-and-line fisherman from the same region, whose father has given up fishing. Leenos was able to raise a loan to fish to earn a livelihood to sustain his family. But even he finds his earnings insufficient to plough back into investments for new material or gear.

Lack of credit means that women like Maria, most of whom are mothers with children, are hampered by the size of their fishing vessels. Maria says her rowboat is so small that she cannot reach the deeper waters where marine resources now appear to be available. Trawling has decimated stocks in her traditional fishing grounds, she says, and "the fish now appear where we cannot go".

Another apparent area of discrimination for the women is in the matter of unionization or organizing under the banner of a common trade union. Most of the fishermen are members of different regional fishermen's associations, though these are not affiliated to any national federation or union. But the women say they are not members—whether this is due to outright gender discrimination or a mere (but

unforgivable) oversight, is not clear. But the women clearly feel the need for some form of association to fight for their causes. "We feel left behind," says Maria.

In this context, Maria was especially happy to have had the chance to attend ICSF's General Body meeting which, she said, opened the eyes of both the men and women participants from the fishing village of Costa do Sol to what is happening in other regions of the world.