

A sea of women

A conference in Spain sought to place on centre stage women's role and status in fisheries and aquaculture

What the organizers had envisioned came true. The international AKTEA Conference, "Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture: Lessons from the Past, Current Actions and Dreams for the Future" (<http://conference.fishwomen.org>), which took place during 10-13 November 2004 in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, was a true meeting place for women working in fisheries and aquaculture from all over the world to exchange experiences, ideas and strategies.

It was also a unique opportunity for the women to meet with researchers from different disciplines of social sciences working on women-in-fisheries-related issues, and for the researchers themselves to expose and discuss their work.

The initiative for the international conference came from the researchers of the programme "FEMMES". This programme aims to promote networking of women's associations in fisheries and aquaculture in Europe. It is funded by the European Commission under the 5th Framework Programme for Research. Under the FEMMES programme, three workshops were held for fisherwomen from European countries, where active networking took place. An international conference was seen as a challenging opportunity to extend the networking and association linkages from Europe to other parts of the world as well.

The success of the conference was evident, in the first place, by the number and diversity of participants, who came from all over the globe, from the top—Norway—to the southern tip of Mozambique and from the coast of Chile in the far west to the coast of the Philippines in the far east. There were

more than 170 participants—fisherwomen, shellfish gatherers, fish processors, fish sellers and researchers, administrators, social workers and women organizers.

For three days, the participants exchanged experiences and reflections about current developments, and the changes needed for the future. To allow everyone an opportunity for expression, the conference was organized into different types of events. There were plenary sessions with oral presentations, discussion forums in smaller groups on invited subjects, and also a poster exhibition where women could show their work, experiences and ambitions in a visual way.

During the plenary sessions and forums, the researchers could test their theories against the reality of the women working day-to-day in fisheries, while the fisherwomen were offered analytical tools to put their personal and local experiences into a broader and systematic framework. They could also familiarize themselves with concepts like production and reproduction, participation and organization, privatization and globalization, diversification and coastal resource management.

Due to the diversity in culture and fishery, the topics also varied widely. Nonetheless, there were many similarities in the issues raised by the women.

Invisible roles

A major concern shared was the 'invisibility' of women's roles in fisheries, leading to their exclusion from decision-making processes, and lack of access to (shell)fish resources, information, formal training, credit, social insurance and welfare benefits, and so on.

Many of women's traditional activities, like net mending or repair, are disappearing. Many women work for the family enterprise without remuneration. Women's enterprises are mostly small-scale and have to compete with large-scale (often international) corporations and chains. The burden of crises often falls on the shoulders of women of fishery households, forcing them to take up longer working days, a wider range of income-generating activities and harmful working conditions.

While discussing their situation, women also clearly expressed their concerns about the degradation of the resources and the threats faced by their communities. All over the world, traditional fisher communities experience the negative effects of globalization, such as the intrusion of mass tourism in coastal areas, the reinforcement of sanitary standards for fish products that favour the large-scale (international) companies over the small-scale producers, and also the centralization of fishery management promoting the expansion of capital-intensive modernization and privatization of fishing rights through the introduction of transferable quotas.

The share of the fish stocks for traditional fisher communities is becoming smaller and smaller, and the social consequences

are adverse. Traditional fisher communities in Europe and North America also struggle with the problem of declining incomes, unemployment and depopulation, even as the fishing capacity has increased enormously. And in countries around Lake Victoria in east Africa, the traditional fisher communities are left with only the bones of the Nile perch for personal consumption, as the entire fillet of the fish is exported to the European market.

Where, in earlier times, capture, processing and trade were integrated activities of a local community, today more and more quantities of fish caught in one part of the world are processed in another part and consumed in yet another part. Local communities are increasingly losing control over the management of their resources and the price and quality of their product. It was felt that a link should be seen between the marginalization of traditional fisher communities and the marginalisation of women in fisheries, between the lack of recognition of traditional or artisanal fisheries as a *way of life* and the lack of recognition of the productive as well as reproductive roles of women in fisheries.

Women's role

The forums gave an opportunity to explore in greater depth the issues of particular concern for women's role and status in fisheries and aquaculture. These

dealt with the legal recognition of women's work; their productive and reproductive roles; access to decisionmaking and economic resources; working conditions and safety at sea and on shore; networking among women's organizations; strategies for resource management; diversification; and tourism.

The forum on "The Legal Recognition of Women's Work" discussed the importance of the formal status of women for accessing decisionmaking and resources such as credit, training, information and also social welfare.

Surprisingly, in the eyes of some, it was seen that in some countries of the South, women working in fisheries are better recognized and better organized than their sister-colleagues in the North.

In Senegal, for instance, women fish vendors are officially recognized and do have access to micro-credit schemes and professional organizations. And in the Philippines, an Act providing for the Magna Carta for Women was passed by the House of Representatives in 2003, by which women directly engaged in municipal and coastal fishing are accorded equal access to the use and management of marine resources, and enjoy all the rights and benefits accruing to stakeholders in the fishing and aquaculture industry.

In contrast, the only status Italian or Dutch women who work in the family fishing enterprise have, is that of wife of the fisherman, without an interest of her own, and her work is primarily seen as ancillary and a sort of extension of her domestic activities. Since 1986, there has existed a special European Union (EU) Directive (86/613) regarding the application of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in a self-employed activity, which applies to situations where spouses are not employees or partners, and where they habitually, under the conditions laid down by national law, participate in the activities of the self-employed worker and perform the same tasks or ancillary tasks.

However, practically no member State of the EU has integrated the Directive in its

national laws. In France, the status of collaborating spouse is recognized in the Fishery Law of 1997, and she now has the right to represent the family enterprise, be elected to the boards of fishermen's organizations and also to join a social security scheme. But the French legal status has many limitations still, in particular for the spouses of the small-scale sector and the crew. In Portugal, the collaborating spouse has, since 1999, been partially legally recognized. Women must be registered as crew members even if they do not go out to sea.

The conference forum on "Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture: Productive and Reproductive Roles" discussed the difference of women's role in small-scale and large-scale industrialized fisheries.

In small-scale fisheries, people are usually self-employed, and production and reproduction are directly linked and overlapping. In industrialized fisheries, production and reproduction are separated as people have become wage-workers.

The dilemma in small-scale fisheries is that the woman's position is defined according to her role in reproduction. A woman is seen as the husband's wife and as a caretaker. Women lack legal status and are invisible when it comes to their role in production. The dilemma in industrialized fisheries is that people have lost control, both over natural resources and their own labour.

Two forums covered the issue of woman's access to decisionmaking. In the first forum, "Women's Participation in Fishermen's Organizations", it was felt that women should not wait to be invited by men or politicians to participate in debate and decisionmaking concerning fisheries. They should rather decide on their own. "Men know how to use women's timidity", it was felt, and the consequence is that women are kept outside the decision-making process.

Organization

It was also noticed that organized women have better chances for recognition than women who are not organized. This was also the case where women had the benefit

of support of government workers or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It was also felt that women should lobby more with politicians and administrators.

Another forum, “Women’s Organizations in Fisheries”, created a general feeling among all that the ongoing organization of women in fisheries and aquaculture has not only been empowering but has also been vital in gaining visibility, access to rights and the valorization of fishing communities. To mention a few successful women’s organizations: Penelope (Italy), Fishermen’s Wives Support Group and Mna na Mara (Ireland), Katosi Women Fisher’s Association (Uganda) and VinVis (Netherlands).

Important facilitating factors in creating sustainable organizations were seen to be a solid foundation and good participation. For a solid foundation, the members should have a feeling of ownership in the organization. It is very important that they are clear about common interests and needs as well have a focused goal. Communication and participation are important, which demand regular meetings. Active interaction between members is also necessary because it permits the establishment of reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity relations amongst them. Outside support and assistance were also seen as important. As major constraints for women’s organizations were seen the existence of too many diverse interests and also the lack of self-confidence and organization skills.

The forum on “Networking Women’s Organizations: Strategies, Opportunities and Constraints”, highlighted various networking efforts of women’s organizations, both at the national and regional levels. Networks have been initiated by various actors: women’s organizations of fishing communities themselves, NGOs, research programmes, governments and regional governmental bodies. Some of those networks were present at the forum: the Nordic Network for Coastal and Fisher Women (Scandinavia), the Task Force of Women in Fisheries (Philippines), Federation 2FM (France), Federation of Net Menders

(Galicia), AREAL, the federation of shellfish gatherers (Galicia), and the National Women’s Fisheries Network (Chile). Although networks have a larger focus and orientation than individual organizations, their success depends much the same on the facilitating factors mentioned above.

The forum on “Working Conditions and Safety at Sea and Ashore” discussed various issues. Firstly, the issue of safety on the boats was discussed. Women felt that men’s attitude towards safety matters is more driven by machismo than by the need for family security. For this reason, it was felt that women face problems in convincing the men to use safety equipment.

Some of the participants (from Portugal, Spain and France) felt that the European fishing fleet need improved safety measures, and they underlined the importance of financing the construction of new vessels with the necessary safety standards.

Deteriorating working conditions were seen as another reason for accidents at sea. These resulted from the decrease in the number of crew on board the vessels, and the longer working hours, enforced because boatowners need to economize to meet with rising investments, decreasing fish prices and higher debts. Alcohol and drug consumption on board boats were also seen as responsible for accidents. Some of the forum participants (from Canada, Ireland and Norway) felt that increasing the cost of insurance may encourage more safety practices, but also place a burden on small businesses and fishing enterprises.

It was furthermore discussed that women should demand the recognition of occupational illnesses of not only men but also women working at sea, shellfish gatherers, fish sellers, etc. In Canada, shellfish processing workers are struggling with occupational asthma and with cumulative trauma disorders (like carpal tunnel syndrome).

Attractive forum

The forum on “Access of Women to Economic Resources: Small-scale Enterprise Management, Diversification

and Micro-credit” attracted women from the South and North, and they spoke about their own experiences in these domains. The common characteristic that emerged from this exchange was that of women’s capacity to adjust to all situations by opting for new economic initiatives.

Examples from Tanzania and Chile showed how the depletion of resources and the scarcity of fish at local markets pushed women to initiate new activities. Women fish processors from around Lake Victoria adapted their work several times by finding new raw materials to process.

Nile Perch, the main species of the lake, is nowadays exported to Northern countries, and local women have lost access to this resource. In the beginning, they changed to processing the other parts of the fish that were discarded by the foreign processing factories that had been established in their country. But today, even these once valueless parts of the fish are exported to other markets, and the women have had to adapt again to the scarcity of raw materials by changing to processing the fish bones.

Women from Chile worked in the past in activities linked to artisanal fisheries but nowadays have to find new activities due to depletion of the fish stocks. Today, they are involved in activities related to

tourism. From fisherwomen, they became diving suit producers.

Today, diversification of fishing household activities is becoming more and more a necessity to improve the household income. Processed fish fetches better prices than raw fish. Senegalese women play an important role on the shore by selling fish (directly or to a fishmonger) and processing (smoking) fish.

Today, they also produce other products such as fish oil. A woman from Ireland narrated how she started to process the wild salmon caught by her husband and later expanded her business by buying from other fishers as well. French shellfish women from the Mediterranean explained how they promote their products by participating in European gastronomic fairs, where they sell oysters and mussels to the visitors.

Financial constraints

All participants said that they faced financial constraints not only in starting their business activities but also when they wanted to expand. Banks do not easily open their doors to women small-scale producers. European women have access to public funds to start a business, but they felt that it is not easy to bridge the first few years, which was the time to establish and consolidate a customer base.

An agenda for action

The keynote speakers at the conference were Barbara Neis (Safety Net and Department of Sociology, St. Johns Memorial University, Canada), Nalini Nayak (ICSF, India) and Katia Frangoudes (CEDEM, University of West Brittany, France).

Barbara Neis spoke about "The Local Consequences of Neoliberal Globalization for Women in Fisheries". She explained how the concentration of capital and control of resources by big corporations resulted in quick shifts of production and investments all over the world. Forty per cent of fish products are traded globally. The introduction of quota systems has facilitated this process. Local fishing communities are confronted with degradation of resources and economic decline. The relations between men and women within fisheries communities have also changed. In her presentation, Barbara Neis used data from the forthcoming book *Changing Tides: Gender, Fisheries and Globalization*, edited by her, Nalini Nayak, Cristina Maneschy and others.

Nalini Nayak spoke about "Challenges to Women in Fisheries in the Globalized World". She explained globalization as the historical process of concentration of resources in the

hands of a few powerful forces and the loss of autonomy for large populations of primary producers, consumers, local communities, governments and States. This process led to great social disparities, conflicts and 'natural' calamities in the world.

For the Northern fisheries, globalization meant a change from open access to the resources to a licensed (controlled) entry. This resulted in the introduction of quotas, including individual transferable quotas (ITQs), professionalism and capitalization of the fishery sector, and the strong role of the State in regulation. Women were pushed into wage-work, under usually bad working conditions or became free labour as a buffer to rising costs.

For the Southern fisheries, however, globalization meant a transition from fishing in the wild to aquaculture. The main fish production is now for export, which has resulted in less fish being available for local consumption. Women are ousted from local post-harvesting activities. Fisheries agreements between countries of the North and countries of the South gave further access to the North to resources in the South, resulting in a depletion of local fish resources and reduced access to resources for the local population. The

Southern women have developed interesting saving schemes, which give them access to credit, and the European participants learnt a lot from these Southern experiences. African women make use of traditional saving systems, which enable them to get micro-credit.

An example of such a traditional saving and credit scheme is the *tontine* system used by Senegalese women. Their capacities to manage and reimburse credit convinced NGOs to support their initiatives.

Nevertheless, the African women felt that the micro-credit was insufficient to expand their businesses, and their activities remained marginal.

The forum on "Fisheries and Coastal Resources Management: Women's Role and Perspectives" discussed the impact of tourism on coastal communities.

Development of tourism brings opportunities, but also threats to local fishing communities.

Tourism can cause displacement of locals, reduction of fishing grounds, danger to the resources (from sport fishers and scuba divers), and bring unwanted values and practices into the community, such as drug abuse and prostitution. Tourism can also have a positive impact for coastal communities by creating new sources of income. The forum revealed that it is often women who initiate tourism-related activities like restaurants, guided tours, and so on.

Planning process

To guarantee that the local population benefits from tourism, it is important that its development be controlled by the local community and that the locals are involved in the planning process as well as in the implementation of tourism projects. However, it was also felt that

liberalization of trade encourages fish-processing industries to shift from the North to the South, accessing the growing availability of cheap wage labour in the South.

For Nalini, the challenges for women in fisheries are to change the present global developments, by putting life and livelihood at the centre stage. She also feels that women have a major role to play in reconstructing relations among people.

Katia Frangoudes presented to the participants the draft version of the "Agenda for Actions in Favour of Women in Aquaculture and Fisheries in Europe". This agenda was the result of two years' work under the FEMME programme.

The agenda is addressed to national and European decisionmakers, urging them to promote women's issues and concerns in the European fisheries. The main demands are summarized below:

1. Recognize the contribution of women to family-based fishing and aquaculture enterprises (management, accounting, etc.) by according them official status.
2. Allow the women involved in production to have access to a professional status.
3. Favour the initiatives for diversification of the family income by allowing women access to micro-credit and training.
4. Recognize the value of professions linked to fisheries often taken on by women: mending, marketing of fish, etc.
5. Abolish all types of discrimination between men and women concerning access to jobs and resources.
6. Recognize and maintain the access of women to representation in public decision-making bodies and professional organizations.
7. Improve women's access to training devices, and create ways of giving value to their professional attainments.
8. Support the organizations of women and their actions.
9. Improve the working and safety conditions on board vessels.
10. Agree to specifically attend to the needs of crew's wives (in issues like difficulties in training, isolation, working conditions, safety on board, etc.).

tourism as a diversification activity in fisheries is only viable for the small-scale inshore sector and not really an option for the bigger seagoing fishing sector.

Worldwide (in Europe too), fisheries and aquaculture are still dominated by family- and artisanal-based organizations. Though the role of women is important for the enterprise and also for the survival of the household, most of the time it remains informal and rarely recognized.

Women also practically do not participate in fisheries' representative bodies and, in general, they are not included in the fisheries policies of the State.

When fisheries or aquaculture faces crises, though, it is the women who are generally spoken to first to undertake new initiatives in diversification or to take up jobs outside the sector to secure the family income. Women have also initiated public

campaigns in defence of their local communities. By getting involved in either local or national actions, fisherwomen appeared in the public debate. They resisted developments that brought great technological and economic changes, but kept labour conditions backward and led to social and economic insecurity and also to the degradation of marine resources.

In the last decade, women of European fisher communities have intensified their activities by building organizations and promoting their interests. Women, more and more, have become aware enough to assert their position as women workers of the sea, and not as 'wife of so-and-so'.

Not just housework

All participants of the conference agreed that their work in fisheries should be regarded as such, and not just as an extension of housework. Women often have responsible tasks in the management

of the enterprise and, in all cases, they are responsible for the family budget. Therefore, they feel that they must get the opportunity to express and promote their ideas.

Women of fishing communities in Europe—as also in other parts of the world—believe that they are part of the fisheries and aquaculture sector, and they want to participate at the same level as men in the public debate concerning the future of fisheries. They also put forward claims for the recognition of their roles, and resist further marginalization. They demand access to decisionmaking, formal education, training and inputs for new economic activities.

In a few places, they have succeeded in bringing these claims even to the highest political levels, which, in some cases, did lead to a legal recognition of their roles. In some countries, women's organizations are accepted by men's organizations, but, in others, they are still ignored. Women often are not seen as equal to men, and this makes them reluctant to express their opinion, needs and ideas. All participants at the conference believed that a better organization of women at the national, regional and even global levels should contribute to the improvement of their position. This conference was one more step forwards in this direction, and, from the positive and energetic participation at the conference, we can certainly expect more steps to follow. ♣

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