

Important yet marginalized

Why there are so few registered women fishers in Norway and what the consequences might be

Fishing in Norway is—and has been—a highly gendered activity, with only a few women working on fishing boats. The total number of Norwegian fisherwomen—and men—has decreased enormously after the cod moratorium in 1989 and the introduction of the quota system in 1990. The table overleaf illustrates this decline.

According to the table, women fishers in Norway registered as full-time fishers have decreased by almost 50 per cent in the last five years, while the number of female part-time fishers seems to be more stable, though with certain variations. The table also shows that between 1988 and 1998, the number of female fishers was relatively stable, while the number of men fishers decreased throughout the whole period, but at a greater rate after 1990. Such a marked decrease says something about the changing fishing industry. In the following sections of this article, I shall go further into why there are so few women in fishing and relate the phenomenon to the regulation of the Norwegian fisheries. Finally, I shall also try to comment on men's changing situation, and point to some social and cultural changes that fishing communities might face.

Following the moratorium and the first years of the quota system, Norway had the largest number of registered female fishers since the gendered registration started. The registered female fishers work on big factory ships filleting fish as well as on boats that are considered 'small' in a Norwegian fishery context. In Finnmark, one of the most fishing-dependent areas of Norway, I know of only one woman, who is skipper on her own boat of 14.98 m length and has her own crew. It should, however, be mentioned that throughout Norwegian

history, women have been engaged in shore-based activities as wives, daughters, relatives and neighbours, without having been officially registered as fishers. Even today, women function as such shore or ground crew, carrying out work that has helped develop an efficient fishery.

It should also be mentioned that only a small number of women have formal ownership in boats. As of August 2004, only 181 women had more than 50 per cent of ownership shares in fishing boats, while 296 women had less than 50 per cent. In the municipality of Nordkapp, close to very good cod grounds, only one woman has been registered as sole proprietor of a boat (5.1 m long), while some are registered as shareholders and part-owners in the companies that own fishing boats. Considering that there are 8,184 registered fishing boats of various sizes in the whole of Norway, the number of female owners seems very small indeed.

Norwegian fisheries are heavily governed by different laws and regulations like the Raw Fish Act, the Participation Act and the Act of Fishing in Salt Water, to mention a few. In order to be registered as a fisher, one has to send in an application to the Directorate of Fishery. To be accepted as a registered full-time fisher, one has to earn 60 per cent of one's income from fisheries, and spend at least 20 weeks in a year fishing.

Different criteria

The criteria for the part-time fishers are different. They can show earnings from shore-based work and spend less time at sea. In order to buy a fishing boat with a quota, one has to have been an active registered fisher for at least a year. In addition to these regulations, there are

Table
Full- and Part-time Women and Men Fishers in Norway, 1983–2004

Year	Full-time				Part-time				Total
	Women	%	Men	%	Women	%	Men	%	
1983	182	0.64	22,273	78.69	106	0.37	5,743	20.29	28,304
1988	575	1.96	21,473	73.14	102	0.35	7,200	24.52	29,539
1990	554	2.01	19,921	72.39	112	0.41	6,931	25.19	27,518
1993	572	2.26	18,500	73.21	105	0.42	6,219	24.61	25,269
1998	530	2.49	14,611	68.60	166	0.78	5,991	28.13	21,298
2003	283	1.64	12,957	75.31	130	0.76	2,835	22.29	17,205
2004	281	1.81	12,396	79.53	114	0.73	2,795	17.93	15,586

also specific rules for buying and selling boats with a quota, depending on the region where one lives.

Eva Munk-Madsen argued some years ago that a resource that was common property and open to 'everybody', has, with the quota system, become closed for most women—in her view, about half of the fishery population. In view of the low numbers of registered women fishers and boatowners, and the fact that women in 1994 owned 192 of 16,216 units of quotas, Munk-Madsen concluded that quotas have become "men's formal property right". Since Munk-Madsen presented her work, even fewer women have been registered, and, consequently, fewer women have formal rights to the quotas. There are several examples of widows who have had to sell their boats with the quota even when they wanted to keep them and start fishing—because they were not entitled as 'fishers', according to the Norwegian laws that regulate fishing. This has been the case even if the woman had performed substantial unpaid work related to fishing and to the upkeep of the boat. Instances of divorces also illustrate the imbalance between women and men as far as quotas and other type of capital investments are concerned. As few women have the right to quotas in Norway, they are effectively a marginalized group in Norwegian fisheries, with little access to the wealth that the resources in the fisheries might represent.

Why are there so few registered women in Norwegian fisheries? This is a question I have often asked since Norway is a country famous for its policies of gender equality. I will explore some possible explanations. First of all, it is important to remember that the majority of women in fisher families have, for ages, performed work on shore, connected to, and important for, the fishing boats. However, this work has, in most cases, not been registered or officially recognized, neither by fisheries officials nor by employment authorities. It has not been considered as a type of work that qualifies for membership in fishermen's unions or resource policy-making institutions. Fishery institutions beyond the community level, and fisheries policymaking have, in this way, remained the domain of men.

Recent years have seen more examples of women who are active in fish harvesting and working together with their husbands. Some of them are registered fishers and enjoy a formal status. Some are also active members of the Norwegian Fishermen's Union. However, neither do the policies of unions and associations focus on questions relevant for women, nor do they recognize that women have contributed to the production in fisheries.

White papers

This neglect is also mirrored in public white papers on fisheries. Fishery questions are also left out in most

Norwegian white papers on gender equality. A contrasting example is a 2004 white paper from the Sami Parliament, where women's participation in fishery and fishery politics is heavily emphasized.

The quota system has not made it easy for the majority of women and men in Norwegian fisheries. Even though only a few women were fishing before the quota system was launched, they could, under certain conditions, continue to own their boat or rent it out if their husbands passed away. This is almost impossible today since a widow seldom has the right to the quota. And, obviously, a boat without fishing rights has a low value. Today even a very old boat with a quota can be sold at a very good price.

Thus, it is not only fish in the market that is a commodity, but fish rights through the quota system are also now a part of the market. If we examine the quota system—at least, the way it is applied in Norway—we will find it consists of a complicated arrangement of decisions, practices, rules and regulations at so many levels as to make it difficult to get a comprehensive overview. For most people, the quota system appears to result from a rather complicated and faceless power process.

Fishery politics and quota questions are still the men's domain since there are few women in the institutions that make the most important decisions. The Norwegian Russian Fishery Commission that decides upon the total allowable catch (TAC) of cod in the Barents Sea is an example where the gender balance is very uneven. In 2004, four women and 24 men from Norway and the same number of women and men from Russia met to negotiate the TAC for the cod stock in the Barents Sea. A national-level example is the committee that advises on the size of the quotas. This committee has always had a heavy deficit of women.

Both these important committees have applied for exemptions from the gender equality Act that mandates 40 per cent women's participation in public committees. They argue that the fishery organizations have few women as members. Representatives from the

Ministry of Fisheries also claim that few women are interested in, and seen as eligible for, such posts.

Such a view reflects the Ministry's attitudes on who ought to be considered as experts in fishing and who should hold special offices. The net result is that women have little influence when quota questions are discussed at the political level. Some have tried to influence the policy, for example, in the committee that advises the Ministry regarding fish stocks. Fisheries and resource management policies are arenas where some men still have the power to define the agenda. The quota system and the debate about this system can, therefore, be looked upon as a strong symbol of men's maintenance of the power in fishery policy and the hegemony of some men. Some say that women's position in fishery policymaking only reflects their position in society at large. This might have been the case if only the number of registered women is taken into consideration. However, if we also consider the number of women who work alongside men, often their spouses, I would rather say that Norwegian fishery policy is facing a democratic deficit.

It should, however, be mentioned that even though little attention has been given to women in relation to resource questions, women's positions have, once in a while, been put on the fishery policy agenda. In the 1970s and 1980s, students and researchers, along with members of the Fisherwomen's Association, raised questions about women in fisheries, in fishing communities and women's influence on fishery politics. The Fisherwomen's Association also emphasized local welfare and cultural questions. The association was among those that put safety at sea on the political agenda. Coastal women from Srya in Finnmark went on the barricades in 1989 after the moratorium was declared and tried to influence policymaking. Women from the environmental association and the Sami Parliament have been among those who have tried to influence the national committee discussing quotas.

Women's projects

Some of the 1980s' activities resulted in the fishing industry's Committee for Women. This Committee put women in coastal

communities and women in the different sectors of fisheries on the fisheries agenda and tried to support women and women's projects in different ways. However, it was not considered a policymaking institution and had little influence on the resource management policy. The committee lasted until 2000, when the Minister of Fisheries cut off financial support.

In recent years, women in the Lofoten area have tried to give more attention to the importance of coastal fisheries, through the mass media and by circulating petitions. Women parliament members drew attention to resource policy matters, just as their counterparts in the Sami Parliament had done. The gender-oriented white paper mentioned earlier was a result of their work. In spite of such efforts, the women's situation, the challenges in fisheries and fishing communities and the lack of recruitment in many of the fishery districts are topics that seem to be very difficult to get on to the political agenda in the new millennium.

To be sure, there have been several changes in the men's situation as well. In one community in Finnmark, there are about 20 boats, 20 local and some non-local registered fishers, of whom three are women. All the fishers are over 30 years old. The majority are more than 40. Four owners or enterprises own half

the boats and quotas. The number of quotas exceeds the number of boats used in the daily fishery. This is possible due to the new arrangements that have been adopted which states that one can transfer for a limited period one quota from one boat to another boat within the same length class (for example, within the group of boats of length 10 to 15 m). Two of the owners have organized themselves into private limited companies, while two others have individual or sole enterprises, the traditional ownership model in this area. We can see a concentration of ownership of boats and quotas and a change in the ownership pattern: Some fishers are trying to succeed in the fishery by getting more quotas, others manage with one boat and one quota, and yet others are leaving the fishery. The 'deficit' of youngsters entering the fishery is quite obvious and the number going into the fishery from this area is smaller than ever before. For the young ones, the fishery industry seems to be a closed industry.

Loose connections

Today, more and more women in the coastal areas of Norway seem to have only a loose connection with fishing, fisher's work and processing in general, compared to the situation years ago when women contributed with an enormous amount of work. Today, they can be their husbands' consultants and share the financial burdens of the household. The majority of women are employed outside

the fishing sector, for example, in teaching, or in other public- and private-sector jobs, since fishery work has been so heavily downscaled in Norway.

Young women and men are moving away from fishing villages. Youngsters and women in fishing and fishery-related activities seem to be the main losers in the fishing industry.

But there are also other considerations to be taken into account. When women leave fisheries, fishing-related households seem to weaken or disappear. When fishing-related households weaken or disappear, fishery as a way of life for women, men and children seems to weaken. When this happens, the population in the fishing villages decreases. These tendencies also have consequences for men—especially for those who are not willing to compete for more and more quotas—and for the young women and men who, in future, would like to go into fishing and fisheries and live in fishing communities.

Unless we all succeed in changing the market-oriented resource policies and the male hegemony in the majority of fishery institutions, the entire fishery-dependent population—women, the majority of men and the future generations—will all be losers. 

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