Australia

Fishing for women

A recent report: *Fishing for women: understanding women's roles in the fishing industry*, **explores women's roles in Australian fisheries. Excerpts from the summary of the report…**

This study forms part of a larger research project initiated by the Women's Industry Network (WIN), a South Australian-based non-government organization for women in the fishing industry, and the Social Sciences Centre of the Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS). The research deals with women in the commercial fishing industry (sometimes termed the 'seafood industry'), covering wild catch fisheries and aquaculture.

Specifically, the research is based on the view that women's roles in the Australian fishing industry are poorly reflected in industry statistics, and women's contributions to industry output and productivity are poorly recognized. There is far more information available on fisheries' production and stock assessments than there is on women's contributions.

The research objectives for the study are to:
- gather information about women involved in the fishing industry
- obtain women's views about their current and future roles
- identify barriers preventing women from becoming more involved in the industry and what might be done to overcome them.

In addition, a major aim of the study is to seek women's views about the value of women's networks and the services these networks need to provide.

These objectives have been achieved by:
- conducting a search of relevant literature
- conducting key informant interviews with 20 people with senior roles or extensive experience in a range of industry sectors (17 women, 3 men)
- sending a mail-back questionnaire to 401 industry women, resulting in a final sample size of 202 respondents
- analyzing interview and questionnaire responses using social science methods.

The two largest work sectors to which questionnaire respondents belonged were the owner-operator category (41.3 per cent of respondents) and government workers, both State and Commonwealth (32.2 per cent). The main work sectors of interviewees were Commonwealth Government (7 interviewees), State Government (5), and non-government organizations (4). Smaller numbers of interviewees and questionnaire respondents came from a range of other work sectors. Interviewees were more 'elite' in terms of their formal educational qualifications than questionnaire respondents.

Major findings of the study are:
- industry tasks most commonly carried out by questionnaire respondents fell into the categories mail/correspondence, book-keeping, and attending meetings—more than 50 per cent normally performed these tasks
- respondents with paid roles in the industry earned a median of 26-50 per cent of their family's income in their industry role
- while most respondents were satisfied with their main industry role, more than half wanted to make some change, and identified obtaining better status or recognition for their industry role as the main change they wanted
- when respondents were asked to indicate the main barriers to them making their desired changes, they identified time commitments/lack of time, lack of money, and lack of training as being most important
- the majority of interviewees (15) believed that women do face barriers in the industry generally – the two major categories they described were practical barriers (time commitments, childcare responsibilities, conditions on boats), and overt discrimination/prejudice from men
- 19 of the 20 interviewees thought there was a role for women's networks in improving women's status in the industry, and they identified information exchange and making contact with other women as the major services needed
- 20.6 per cent of respondents were already members of a women's network, and a further 61.6 per cent indicated they might join – the main services wanted overall from networks were providing a forum to meet other industry women, and promoting industry-related training for women.

Specific recommendations for further development of the research are:

- developing a more comprehensive and representative list of women in the industry
- developing basic statistics and data bases about industry women and their work
- identifying in more detail the gender imbalances currently existing in fisheries-related organizations and fisheries decision-making bodies
- undertaking further searches for similar research, particularly on Aboriginal women's fishing practices, both commercial and subsistence
- undertaking more specific studies of women working in specialized sectors of the industry, especially women working in home-based family fishing businesses
- undertaking research on women's ownership of property and property rights in the industry (including gear, vessels, licenses and quotas)
- investigating current health and safety standards for vessels operating in the wild catch sector and the extent to which these deter women from participating more fully
- investigating wider policy implications of the study's findings and developing action plans to address the issues identified.

The report also highlights issues relating to the nature of the fishing industry, especially the wild catch sector, and its popular image. There is a need for it to move away from traditional stereotypes of 'blokes in boats' to a more community and family-based image. Industry women have a major role in achieving this image change. A copy of the document is available from www.brs.gov.au/social_sciences/fishwomen.pdf