

## From Africa/ Mozambique

### Proud of their achievements

*An enterprising group of women from a remote island in Mozambique, get together to increase their income*

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Tucked away in the lush mangroves, an hour's boat ride from Angoche, in Mozambique, lies the little island of Mituban. With the impression that one is sailing through a water forest, one alights in the water, wades through the younger mangroves and steps on to land as if alighting on another planet. Walking a little further, one realizes that one is in a fairly populous little village, with majestic coconut palms and neatly thatched huts scattered all over. The first little fence is the playground of a rather large school, again with mud walls and thatched roof. People are gathered in the shade of a large cashew tree. In the majority are the women, who then talk about their work.

This is an exclusively Muslim village. The men have been hunting crabs using their small canoes and little spears and their hands. Selling these crabs to mainland merchants brings them the cash they need to buy food. But, for the most part, this little island is self-sufficient, with potters who make the utensils, carpenters who make the furniture from mangrove wood, people who thatch their own houses and make rope from the coconut fibre. They grow their own vegetables and rice in the marshes when the salinity in the water falls. People seem to be dependent on the mainland mainly for medical assistance and higher-level schooling.

It is on this little island, that the women fishers have a collective. The origins of this group are ambiguous but from what the women say, it happened in mid-1998 when a couple from an NGO called PENDANA visited the island and interacted with the women. They suggested that the women could earn money through shrimp capture and sale. This couple brought in some small nylon gill-nets and insulated boxes and suggested that the women work in pairs, each pair using one net to catch shrimp. As 32 women were initially interested, 16 groups were formed. All went well and the couple came regularly to collect the shrimp that they took to sell to the mainland. After two months, the women began asking for their money and the couple kept

putting it off. This went on for six full months. The couple then disappeared and the women were left high and dry.

The local fishing community in Angoche, which was in the process of organizing through the Nampula Artisanal Fisheries Project, a project initiated by IDPPE, heard about the plight of these women. The enthusiastic secretary of the APPA (the newly created Fishermen's Association), then tried to do all he could to get these women their due. The fisheries association helped the women's group to elaborate a project proposal, that was then submitted to the office of the First Lady through the District Office. The project was approved and a grant was made available for the purchase of a motor boat for this group. Once the women had a boat of their own, they were able to take their shrimp to sell directly and money started coming in. Enthused by this success, other women joined the group, which has now doubled to 64 members.

Each pair records the quantity of shrimp caught, and the women collectively decide on who goes to sell the catch. Two percent of the income from the sale is deposited in a common fund maintained by the secretary of the group. Each woman has a book in which her contributions are recorded. Interestingly, after being cheated in the initial stages, the women do not trust anybody with their money, not even a bank. So they handle it themselves and they have a fairly large sum stored away somewhere. Now they also have a loan from the APPA with which they have bought more nets for their members. The group now owns two boats, one freezer and a generator.

This is indeed an interesting and enthusiastic group of women who feel proud of their achievements. All these women earlier gathered seafood for their own consumption. Being so far away from civilization as it were, they managed with what they had. Their men still do not own any boats or gear but continue to hunt crab and gather fuel from the mangroves. Being distrustful of outside assistance, this little group is determined to learn by trial and error. Their freezer is not yet functional and to operate and manage it will entail additional costs and skills that the women themselves do not have at present.

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