



NORTH AMERICA

PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN NORTH AMERICA

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Abstract

Women in the fisheries in the United States have varied roles. They range from the most traditional - that of a fisherman's wife and support-partner in his business - to that of scientists and researchers in fisheries-related agencies. As wives, women are expected to be very flexible - strong, resourceful heads-of-household while the husband is at sea - and that of a partner or wife when he returns home. Women researchers and advocates are respected but it is more difficult for a woman representing private interests to gain respect; the government researcher has the benefit of a mantle of government credibility.

This paper looks at various roles women in North America play in the fisheries sector. It is based on personal interviews and observations with various men and women in the fisheries-related industry. Although progress has been made over the past 20 years in terms of improving women's role and status in various occupations, much needs to be done for gender equality in the fisheries.

Women in Fisheries in North America

Women play many roles in the fisheries in the United States. The most traditional is that of a fisherman's wife. In most of the U.S., the role a fisherman's wife plays, particularly for a captain or owner's wife, is that of a partner in a business, with a very defined role. She serves as a shore captain handling the administrative tasks that allow the boat to fish. In recent years, this role has come to include fisheries management and advocacy. Women are on shore when the regulatory hearings are held. The husbands are unable to attend as they are so often at sea. In addition, since it is the women who typically run the finances, they tend to be highly sensitive to issues that will impact income.

A common difficulty for the wives is loneliness. Women who were not born into fishing families must adapt to a fishing life. Often this involves finding their own identity; often through obtaining fishing-related jobs.

Wives must be very flexible. They are expected to be strong, resourceful heads-of-household while the husband is at sea, and yet when he returns they must change their colors to be one of a partnership, and sometimes to a subservient role. This is difficult for some. The fishing family wives are serious while the husbands are at sea; yet when they return, their husbands are often ready for late nights and celebrations. The adage "work hard, play hard" is very appropriate. The women are responsible for financial management and the sudden free spending when the spouses are in port is difficult. Does she let it go unhindered, knowing that they cannot afford it? Or does she attempt to reign in the spending in the hope of staying on budget. How she decides to play her role during these times has interpersonal ramifications.

Even in those fishing families who do not own boats, the women are very informed about fishing regulations. They are knowledgeable about the impact of changes in regulations. Many fishing wives become advocates for fishing. Sometimes this is an informal role, making sure to tell the fishing family

story to those they encounter or by attending hearings and meetings; or through formal compensated positions.

Women work in many support roles to those who are on the water catching fish. They work as dockworkers, ferry deck hands, biologists, regulators, fish sellers, fish buyers, accountants and trade association heads. All seem to feel a connectedness to the sea and to other fishing families and express a strong sense of community. Women who work on the waterfront as deck hands or in other support roles feel that they are a small part of the fishing community. Those who are on the water often express a special bond that comes from working on the water.

Michelle is a deck hand for a ferry company. She remarks on the strong fishing community. She says, "It's like we ferry workers are a little piece of that. There's a bond that develops as a result of working on the water. There is a constant level of danger. Fishermen tend to defend each other."

Fishing wives are multi-talented. The ability to do many things often involves a critical role in the business.

Terrie was the first woman to act as a seller's representative at the Portland Fish Exchange. She attended the fish auction with her husband. She had never been there before and stood back watching and observing the techniques the first few sellers used to get a higher price. When it was time for her husband to sell his fish, she was dismayed when he simply accepted the price offered, and did not hold out or argue for a higher price. When she, the one responsible for paying bills at home and putting meals on the table, commented on this, her husband's response was, "If you think you can do it better, go ahead." She did. She took over the role of selling the fish each time the boat returned. Soon others realized that they too could improve the income to their families, and did similarly. She eventually represented some 35 boats. It became a woman's job. Some referred to part of Portland's wharf as "Portland's Petticoat Lane" because all the businesses were run by women. She said, "Once I got into the seller's rep business, other wives got into it too. And why not? We always took care of the money. We could stretch a penny. It's been that way with fishermen's wives forever."

This was a natural feat. They often are in families with unsteady income and long droughts between paychecks. They have survival skills. The husbands had typically returned cold, tired, and hungry from a long trip at sea. They naturally were pulled to get home and not waste time at the auction. On the other hand, the women who eventually earned a large presence in this part of the fishery came in fresh ready for the job. Again, this started as survival. How to "stretch a penny." Now, it is a respected job in which one expects to find many women.

Most take pride in their cooking. When their husbands return home from sea, having been cold for long periods, good hot food is a must. They are proud that they can make a nourishing meal from nothing - "stretching a penny" as Terrie explained.

There are a number of fishers' wives associations. The activities they undertake, and the role they play varies from port to port.

One woman, a boat owner with her husband, said she had belonged and served as an officer. She stated that she was glad for her involvement; that they had done many good things, but that, like the fishing industry, the association and its pressing issues had become all-consuming. The commitment in a fishing family is total, and that this was as well. She said, "fishing, or being married to a fisherman—it's a hard life. Don't go into it unless you can be totally committed to it. It takes up all your time one way or the other. It becomes your life."

There are variations in the roles women play in fisheries. For example, the women of both New Bedford and Gloucester, Massachusetts, are both involved in various aspects of the fishing industry. However,

while the women of Gloucester work outside their homes in a variety of jobs, they also tend to be very involved in their family businesses. Like wives in fishing communities around the world, Gloucester women have historically been the keepers of the financial records. In contrast, New Bedford financial service companies, known as settlement houses, have traditionally been used by the majority of the fleet for their bookkeeping. Several settlement houses are owned or operated by women, but the services are on a fee for service basis rather than regarded as a family responsibility.

Pride as a Common Characteristic

Women in fisheries, and particularly fishers' wives are proud. Conversations with them invariably lead to comments about certain traits they are proud of.

Susan and her husband owned a boat and it sunk in the harbor. The harbormaster was going to fine them \$100 a day until it was removed. They had no money to have it removed. The alternative was to let go of the boat and have the state pay for it. Susan had too much pride to do this. Somehow the newspaper reporter interviewed Susan about their dilemma. And after the large amount of interest in the story, Susan held a silent auction to raise money to remove the boat. She received donations of goods and services and people bid on these items, all to support her removal of the boat from the bottom. Her husband was disappointed because it pointed out in a very public way that they were unable to afford to take care of their responsibilities. He did not want the help. They both took great pride in their business but had different reactions to the problem. Susan easily raised enough money to remove the boat. Afterward she realized that she could advocate; that she had strengths she did not know about.

All of the fishers' wives or significant others took great pride in their ability to make a hearty meal with few ingredients and were proud that they managed to keep food on the table and that their children "did not want for anything."

Paths to Involvement in Fisheries

Women who work on the water get there by a variety of routes, most looking for the higher pay of working on the water than is available in many shore side positions. A few obtain their positions as a summer, temporary job; some inherit boats from their fathers. Others have chosen to go to sea to supplement income.

Jane is a 62-year-old lobsterman. She had worked on the water with her father during summers and full time for a few years. Years later she married a lobsterman, and sometimes worked as his sternman. When the regulations changed to limiting the number of traps that he could fish, they obtained a second boat and she has been fishing the additional traps. It was a way to bolster family income. She loves the water and remarks on the peacefulness of it.

Judy was a business consultant working for a moderate sized firm. Her firm transferred her to work in a fishing-related business. She worked in New York's infamous Fulton Market many years ago, long before it was acceptable for women to work there. She does not feel that she was discriminated against in this business. Before starting work in the "The Market" she had decided to treat others with special respect, inquiring about their families as she came to know them. As a result, she feels that they cheated her the same amount that they would cheat anyone else. Her comment, "That's equality, I guess." After being a buyer she moved on to being a management consultant in seafood. She knew her material and no one ever doubted her abilities. She feels that had she not "earned her stars" (paid her dues)

that she would have had a harder time gaining credibility. She states that she did not allow her female presence to close doors. She believes it opened doors for her, and she made sure that no one had reason to treat her differently.

Margaret is the co-owner of a boat with her husband. She has sold fish on the Boston pier when women were an uncommon presence. Now, in addition to her fiscal and administrative responsibilities for the boat, she serves as a lobbyist for a number of ground fish group. She says of her days on the fish pier, "I think the men tried to take advantage of me-but not to any greater extent than anyone else. I received the same foul language as everyone else."

Has There Been Progress in Women's Involvement in Fisheries?

The chief U.S. national marine fisheries agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, has many women scientists and researchers. Today, there are women who serve as deputy directors of several of the regional offices distributed throughout the country. Women are increasingly present in greater numbers than 20 years ago.

The Boston International Seafood Show is the major seafood show in North America. Twenty years ago the only women who were at the show were dressed in revealing clothing handing out drinks to lure the male buyers into their sales booth. Although these women are still fixtures at the show, their clothing is not quite as revealing, and we now find women in the back of most of the vendor booths as well as in front doing the buying. Notably, women are not just at the consumer-oriented booths selling sauces and prepared food products, they are also knowledgably selling diesel engines, refrigerated trucks, drive trains, propellers and fishing gear.

Is Physical Safety a Concern for Women in Fisheries?

Our lobbyist, boat co-owner notes that on occasion she has received some threats following a particularly heated meeting, but that nothing has ever come of those threats. She also remarks on the kindness of some others-that on a few occasions someone has come up to her following one of those heated meetings and quietly indicated that he would walk her to her car that day. This has never offended her, nor does she expect this treatment. Most of the women I spoke with indicated that on a few occasions there were instances when they were somewhat uncomfortable for their safety. All indicated that they did not dwell on these issues. None reported untoward harassment.

Why are there so Few Women on the Water?

One person I spoke with indicated that in all likelihood less than one percent of those fishing on the water are women. Several individuals indicated that the physical demands of the job make it unattractive. Particularly now that most trips are made in poor weather when the price is high. This is not inviting to women-or to most men. Many of the individuals I interviewed indicated that women were entirely capable of meeting the physical demands of the job, but that few want to.

Women who do work on the water tend to work in the smaller boat, inshore fisheries. Often women who are at sea tend to work with their husbands, boyfriends or fathers. I heard the tale of a young woman who worked as a sternman for her father for a number of years. She came ashore only when it became increasingly difficult for her to find child-care for her young daughter so early in the mornings.

On the West Coast of the United States there are some differences. As in the east, the smaller boats are family businesses, but here women tend to be more involved with the fishing side of the family fishing business.

A family of four walks down the fish pier. Mom, Dad, two kids and the dog. Dad is carrying a sea bag. He kisses his wife, he's about to go to sea. Or is he? At the last minute he tosses the bag to his wife and the kids call out "catch lots of fish Mom."

There are not many women crew at sea on boats to which they have no family connection.

I interviewed a West Coast research biologist who spends time at sea. She indicated that while there are not abundant numbers of women at sea, that there are positions available. One East Coast individual stated that the significant competition for positions on fishing boats might be one reason there are scant numbers of women on the water. Reasons for the competition include the recent prosperity of fishing, leading more to want to be involved; contraction of the industry under government effort to reduce the size of the fleets, and the higher debt load on boats, which often causes boats to sail with a short crew to maximize profits for each crew member.

Although there are greater numbers of women in the recreational fisheries, the majority are men. A slightly greater percentage of aquaculture workers are women, although the numbers are still quite small. To be respected, women aquaculturists need to "keep their noses clean" and prove themselves more so than a male would need to do. This is according to a seasoned female resource conservation and enforcement officer.

Many on the water state that they feel equal to the men with whom they work. They also state that the men see them as equals.

Do Women in Fisheries Feel that they are Respected?

Our lobbyist, Margaret, feels that her opinions are welcome and respected at policy meetings. A fishing newspaper editor whom I interviewed indicated that she felt that women researchers and advocates were respected. However, she indicated that it was harder for a woman representing private interests to gain respect. The government researcher has the benefit of a mantle of government credibility. Private individuals do not have this entrée of credibility, meaning that these women have to prove themselves before gaining respect. She feels that they have to prove themselves often in ways that men would not have to.

Our conservation officer feels that while her opinions were respected, she felt that she would have received additional respect had the same opinion been voiced by a male.

Many who have worked in fisheries state that there is a real understated importance of the roles that women play in fisheries. The administrative duties done by women, typically wives, are absolutely critical to the fishing industry.

Equality

Most individuals interviewed stated that from their own personal observations that there is not yet gender equality in the fisheries. However, all indicated that progress has been made over the past 20 years. Equality has not come as far as it needs to.

Louise is a fish buyer with more than twenty years experience at a major seafood house. Her hours are long and the phone rings constantly calling for instant buying decisions. She travels occasionally to meet with suppliers and to attend conferences and trade shows. She indicated that on several occasions she has been asked not to attend out of town conferences because the other person attending from the same firm was a male and her attendance would have required payment for an additional hotel room. She states that she has had to scratch for everything she has; something that she does not see with the men coming up through the ranks. Her comment-"working harder than the men wears on me, I'm tired."

Conclusions

Although they are not often on the water, the role women play in a family fishing business is necessary and critical to the success of the business. The traditional husband and wife roles: him on the water, her on the shore, are both crucial to the success of the family business.

Most individuals interviewed wondered if the level of equality in fisheries was not too much different than other business sectors. Several expressed the sentiment that the level of equality or inequality in the fisheries reflects the society in which we live.

Acknowledgements

In the course of preparing this presentation, a literature review was done. The scant literature led me to conduct interviews with more than two dozen individuals in the fisheries sector. I was fortunate to be referred to Ms. Shelley Berc, of Creativity Workshops, who is writing a play about women in fisheries. I am deeply indebted to Ms. Berc for sharing information she gathered during her ongoing research. Her play will be staged in Portland, Maine, in the spring of 2002. Most individuals who were interviewed by me as well as by Ms. Berc requested that their identity not be disclosed. So that the reader can understand the positions held and experience of the interviewees I have categorized those interviewed. Individuals interviewed by me or Ms. Berc included:

- Fisher's wife; seller's rep
- Ferry Deck Hand
- Captain's Wives (3)
- Captain's young daughter (2)
- Shellfish Biologist
- Fisherman's wife
- Lobsterman (female)
- Fishing Trade Association Executive Directors (2)
- Coastal Development Corporation head
- Fish Buyer, major seafood distributor
- Fisheries Advocate (2)
- Government Fisheries program head
- Ground fish boat co-owner, fisheries advocate
- University Anthropologist
- University Biologist (2)
- Fishing Newspaper editor (2)
- Enforcement officer
- Boat Owner
- Fishing Gear salesperson

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