

WOMEN in African Artisanal Fisheries

When will they receive the attention they deserve?

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Despite the best of intentions, male dominance in "expert" and government positions is a serious obstacle to the change that is required.

A few things struck me as I travelled up and down West Africa, in the Sahel and, to a much lesser extent, in East Africa to visit European-Community-supported fisheries projects and to keep in touch with the fisheries world remote from the office back in Europe.

There is, first of all, the overriding importance of artisanal fisheries. Practically all inland water fisheries are small-scale and, on the marine side, fishermen in Mbour and Joal (Sénégal) or Elmina and Cape Coast (Ghana) are second to none in their daring daily outings in open *pirogues*. Such ventures provide some 70% of the 4.5 million t of domestically-caught fish. Their products are the principal source of cheap animal protein for the markets of the continent.

Of Africa's 570 million inhabitants, about 1.9 million are fishermen, with Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania and Egypt alone accounting for just under half the total. Using a traditional rule of thumb - that postharvest activities create about five jobs for every inland water fisherman and three for every marine fisherman -

the total employment related directly to fisheries must be around 10 million people or almost 9% of the total labor force in agriculture.*

Postharvest Activities

The other striking feature in many countries is the predominant role of women in the postharvest sector. Though there are great differences from one country to another, their contribution to the sector cannot be overemphasized. From landing the fish, to processing and selling in the market, women are often in charge. They may clean and salt-dry bigger species including shark, or clean and smoke-dry small pelagic species like sardines and *bonga* (*Ethmalosa fimbriata*) before they take the produce to the local or regional market. Some of them, like groups of Ghanaian women, have established forward bases in countries like Sénégal, the Gambia, and Congo to buy fish and process it to Ghanaian taste (particularly shark and rays) to satisfy the demand at home which far exceeds production in their own resource-limited waters.

What makes these women "tick"? Men and women have complementary activities. But they have largely separate budgets, each contributing part of the household expenses. The woman/wife is usually responsible for the children's food, clothing, schooling and health care - with variations from one country or ethnic/social group to another. Their husband/partner commonly contributes to extraordinary expenses (i.e., for feasts,



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Selling small dried fish near Akosombo, Ghana.

*Bonzon, A. and B. Horemans. 1988. Socioeconomic database on African fisheries. FAO Fish Circ. 10:109 p.

medical care, etc.). But the woman will, in addition, typically pursue a number of income-earning activities such as processing and marketing fish during peak fishing season of small pelagics, growing rice and vegetables during the rainy season and thereafter, being involved in coconut oil production and sometimes in petty trade.

Women in Production

More than realized and documented by most researchers, women and youths also play an important role in production. While I have seen only few cases in Africa where women went fishing on *pirogues* (e.g., Nigerian fisherwomen in Gabon), the capture and collection of seafood in canals, mangroves, small ponds, fish holes, etc. for the family or trade is a familiar practice in most places. However, because of their dispersion, these activities are rarely recorded in official catch and consumption statistics.

As part of her commercial activities, the wife buys fish from her husband and/or sons for processing. If she has granted them a loan for necessary inputs such as nets, spare parts, fuel, etc. for the next fishing trip, this loan will be repaid with interest in the form of lower-priced fish. The real interest rates may be as high as 70%, reflecting the volatility of markets, weak currencies and often extremely high replacement costs of imported materials. In the absence of a formal credit sector for artisanal fishing and other small-scale operations, women fish processors and traders often ensure crucial credit and supplies at flexible conditions. Since they are themselves part of the chain, they offer access to such facilities in tune with the changing conditions of the sector and mostly well beyond the services offered by a banking institution.

Yet females often suffer lower social status than males and, on the average, have inferior access to food, formal education and health care.

Obstacles to Development

It seems that fisheries development projects have not changed much in favor of women. On the contrary, projects are too often conceived by experts (men) for the producers (fishermen) without considering its effects on the postharvest sector. Not realizing the traditional social partitioning of labor and duties, it was



Women processing the tilapia catch from a freshwater reservoir near Accra, Ghana.

usually assumed that production increase in itself would lead to the greater well-being of the "family." We know now that the opposite has been achieved in some cases.

Indeed, the introduction of advanced technologies towards catches of higher value species for export may, in some cases, erode the mainstay of cheap pelagic species for domestic consumers. This negative macroeconomic effect may well be complemented by a negative microeconomic effect on the families since there will be less fish for the women to buy and trade while the men do not feel the need to support their families more than in the past. Despite the best of intentions, male dominance in "expert" and government positions is a serious obstacle for the sort of change that is required.

Even if men do go to the trouble of investigating women's constraints and aspirations before proposing a development project, in many cases, social conditioning would prevent (fisher)women from talking directly to men from outside the community.

The high degree of illiteracy among women in rural and fishing communities is another obstacle to involving them actively in the development process. If only cursory attention is paid to the more obvious constraints of the community, and then remedies are proposed (i.e., in terms of formal credit, etc.), the women may find themselves more marginalized than before! But the artisanal fisheries

sector depends critically on those very women, who keep parts of the process going in most arduous conditions. Improvements elsewhere paradoxically increase the load on the very part of the system which needs most support.

Could it be that the neglect of women's crucial role in fisheries has partly provoked the stagnation of African domestic production which, together with population growth and financial constraints on complementary imports, has translated into a drastic average decrease of per capita supply from 11.5 to 9 kg/year from 1970 to 1986?

When will donors and governments have the vision and courage to act on these observations and involve women systematically, and on their own terms, from the very planning stage of a project? When will they hire more women into responsible positions and ensure better education and training for the "average" woman as the most cost-effective and sustainable, not to mention equitable, way to overcome some of the shortfalls?



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