

Then and Now—Women in Norway's Fisheries

Twenty-five years after the introduction of the quota system, significant challenges confront women in Norway's fisheries

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Norway is considered to be one of the largest fishery nations in Europe. Despite this, there are few professional women fishers in the country. According to statistical data released in 2017 by the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries for 2016 (which this article mainly draws upon), the number of full-time women fishers in Norway was 274 compared to more than 9,000 full-time men fishers. Fishing and fishery politics have been so male dominated in Western societies that researchers have characterised fishing in general, and the quota system, introduced in Norway in 1990, in particular, as a patriarchal system. Women registered as fishers may be few but they have, particularly in the past, participated in fishing, performing tasks like baiting the long-lines, washing the boat, doing administration work or helping to deliver fish at the fish plants. In some cases, they were, and are, fishing near the coast. These days, women work outside fisheries and bring home an important salary. They still continue to shoulder household and community responsibilities. Women thus contribute to the efficiency of the fisheries, increase the security of fishing households and serve as an important link connecting fish boat, household and community.

Interestingly, in contrast to the farming sector in the country, in Norway's fisheries, women's work, regardless of the type of work, does not make them eligible for membership in fishermen's associations. This may be one of the main reasons why issues related to women in the fisheries seldom find discussion in important official policy papers.

As a researcher interested in gender questions and women's rights, I find the absence of gender issues in fishery politics rather strange in a country that has been noted by the World Economic Forum in 2017 for its politics of equality. In fact, for years, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) placed special emphasis on gender in the overseas projects they financed. However, if a gender perspective were to be properly applied, women and men contributing to fishing would deserve the same rights, independent of where they carried out their fishing tasks.

In many of my previous articles since the 1970s, I have focused on women in fishery households and communities. In this article, I will focus on women as fishers in small-scale coastal fishing. I will also try to point to some factors that can help to explain the low number of registered women fishers. Finally, I will end with examples of changes that have taken place and that may lead to improving the situation of women fishers in Norway.

In contrast to the number of male fishers, the number of registered women fishers in Norway has always been low. The number of women registered as primary or full-time fishers was highest (about 580) just before and just after 1990 when Norway introduced the quota system in coastal fishing. These numbers also included women working on ocean-going factory skips. In all, full-time and part-time women fishers accounted for only 3.1 per cent of registered fishers in Norway in 2016, and clearly, with only a few exceptions, they can be considered as a minority in the primarily male world of fishing.

The majority of full-time fishers are found in three of Norway's northernmost counties. In 2016, in the county of Nordland, there were 66 women and 2,191 men registered as fishers; in Troms, there were 28 women and 1,028 men; and in Finnmark, 57 women and 1,088. In the county of Møre and Romsdal

ANNE-LISE EKREM



The Sami Siida meeting was held in Øvre Alta, Norway and the laavo (the tent) was used as the meeting room where the professional women fishers met for the first time

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in western Norway, 63 women and 1,962 men were registered fishers. Between the years 1990 and 2016, the sharpest increase in the numbers of women who pursued fishing as a primary occupation took place in Finnmark, where the municipality of Nordkapp had the highest number of women fishers. Since their numbers are small women fishers tend to be dispersed amongst the many fishing communities along the long Norwegian coast.

The 2016 data also indicates an age-related decline in the numbers of women fishers who are most numerous in the age group 20 and 29 years, and progressively decline in numbers as the age range increases.

Women also own coastal fishing boats. In 2016, the number of women boat owners was 118 out of a total of 274 full-time women fishers. The corresponding number of male boat owners was 5,836 out of a total of 9,137 full-time male fishers. Even though both women and men own boats, the majority of owners are men.

Today, when coastal fishery is regulated by quotas, fishers have to reckon with the fact that politicians have a strong influence on the quota system since the size of a quota is set by the Directorate after consultation with fishery politicians and researchers. The quota system today is organised in a closed and open group and the quotas are allocated per boat and not per person. In 2016, fishers controlled 1,779 fishing permits in the closed group, and 1,493 of the permit holders were registered as residents in northern Norway. However, few women owned a boat with a quota in the closed group. In Nordland for instance, three women owned a boat with a quota in the closed group, two women in Troms, and eight in the northern most county of Finnmark. A quota in the closed group, as opposed to a quota in the open group, can be bought and sold, and can therefore represent a high value. According to local fishers in Finnmark, in 2017, quotas in the closed group belonging to boats between 10 and 10.99 metres could be sold for anything between USD 150,000 to 200,000. The high quota price is therefore a drawback for newcomers who want to buy a quota. Few women are able to afford this investment. Most women participate therefore in open group fishing. When a fisher in the open group stops fishing, the quota is returned to the Directorate of Fisheries which then redistributes them to new fishers. Norway also has an arrangement of recruitment quotas for people 30 years of age or younger. Annually, 10 to 15 recruitment quotas in the

closed group are allocated. Till date, only one woman has been allocated a quota under this arrangement.

Given the low numbers of women fishers, and the lack of formal acceptance for shore work by women, their status can be considered to be akin to that of guests at an all-men's table.

Why are there so few women fishers in a fishery nation like Norway? There are many reasons for the relatively low numbers not only of women fishers but also of women who are boat owners, and owners of closed group quota boats.

One explanation could be that fishing is a profession with a strong division of labour between women's and men's work. This division of labour is embedded in the fishery culture and seldom questioned. This was understandable in earlier days when both women's and men's work was hard and time-consuming, and their way of life could be defined as a peasant way of life with low commercialisation and little formal organisation. In Norway, many of the social welfare rights are based on paid work. Therefore, when the welfare system was introduced in Norway, mainly after World War II, it was men fishers' paid work that was registered in the tax files, providing a basis for holiday allowances, sickness compensations and pensions. Women's contributions were not taken into consideration except for some of the general welfare rights, like a minimum pension, that all Norwegian citizens are entitled to. Such a division of labour was also supported by an education system that perpetuated the notion of a gender divided fishery.

Furthermore, unionising in the fisheries fell into the male domain. The different fishermen's associations through the years had few women as full members. The exception is of women from the western part of Norway who own bigger vessels. They have been active in Norges Fiskarlag, participating in many relevant subsections and meeting. The fishermen's associations limited themselves to questions of resources, fish prices, payment, and relations to fish buyers and to the government. Women's issues were not problematised.

When women within the sector organised, they came together as members of associations for improving local peoples' health, or working for the temperance movement, and sometimes in Christian organisations. In the beginning, few became members of labour unions. With such gendered patterns, women from fishing

households had, and continue to have, negligible influence on fishing politics, while they are important actors in developing the economic and social life of the fishery households and communities. Fiskarkvinnelaget or The Fisherwomen's Association, which functioned from 1953 to 2011, and was associated with Norges Fiskarlag, organised women living in fishing villages, working hard to improve the social and cultural conditions in their communities, as well as putting fisherpeople's safety and security on the agenda.

The gender division in politics has impacted the content of official policy papers. The political decisions reveal a lack of cognizance of women's issues and gender perspectives. Most of the governmental white and green papers build on the notion that fishing is a male occupation, with little thought given to the fact that the boat, the household and the community are all strongly interconnected. This can also be related to the fact that during the post-war years in Western societies, married, adult women were strongly connected to the concept of 'housewives'.

Even up to now there is evidence that the official decisions excluding women's concerns have led to worsening conditions for fishing families. For instance, women took the initiative in nation wide political actions as part of the Coastal Women's Action in 1989, when the cod moratorium was launched. Such actions sought to defend the rights of coastal fishing households and communities, and oppose privatisation of fishery resources. However, when the Norwegian Minister of Fishery and Coastal Affairs in 2004 closed down the Regulation Committee that was mandated to advice on quota regulation, a lack of female representation in this Committee was given as the cause. A few years later, when Committee discussions around quotas were resumed, the official requirement of participation of at least 40 per cent women was dispensed with.

The lack of a gender perspective in policy-making means that the concerns of women are not taken into account, particularly the difficulties they face in combining fishing and motherhood and other caring duties in the household. Further, women seeking to go into fishing also face many obstacles on cultural, economic and social fronts. These factors explain why many of the young women who started in fishing in recent times have quit. While in other industries, gender concerns have been sought to be addressed, this concern has been totally lacking in the fishery

sector. Despite the hurdles that women face in fishing as well as in running their households, their participation in community and other organisational activities demonstrate how they continue to be a force in many situations in the sector. Positive interventions, from the government, from the society in general and from the fishery population are therefore needed to support the participation of fisher women. The following highlight some possibilities.

Since the 1989 Coastal Women's Action campaign, much has changed. Women have joined other action groups fighting for the rights of small-scale fisheries and against privatisation. Some have also become members of political parties. In fact, between 2005 and 2015 all the Ministers of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs were women. However, they too put little or no emphasis on the situation of women fishers.

Another change that took place after the Coastal Women's Action campaign was that the Directorate of Fisheries, through the intervention of some concerned civil servants, opened up options for women wanting to register as a full-time or a part-time fisher. They recognised the roles of women engaged in baiting long-lines, maintaining boats, helping deliver catch, and assisting their fisher husbands in the administration of the boat. By recognising this supportive role of women, a barrier was broken to their being registered as fishers. Examples from Finnmark show that opening up the registration to women even gave opportunities to women from abroad, sometimes married to local fishers, to gain rights as registered fishers.

Another example is the Action Plan for Women in Marine Sector, initiated by the Ministries of Fisheries and of Family and Equality Affairs. This initiative followed the disbandment of the Regulation Committee in 2004.

The plan focused on the low numbers of women fishers and women in aquaculture, and aimed to increase the number of women fishers to three per cent by 2010, four per cent by 2015, and eight per cent by 2020. The weakness of the plan was that no specific road map or implementation strategy was specified. The responsibility for implementation was in the hands of the participating institutions. Norway therefore remains far from reaching the Plan's objectives.

During the spring of 2017, the question of women's participation became an issue, through the intervention of the local and fishery media. A young woman fisher from Finnmark

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met with opposition and scepticism from fishers and the traditional fishing community, when she bought her own boat in 2016. After a vibrant discussion in the media, another woman fisher, Trude Karlsen Halvorsen, took the initiative to call a meeting for women fishers.

In May 2017, more than 15 women met in Alta supported by some of the fishery organisations. At the meeting, they exchanged experiences and discussed how they could organise. The result was the formation of the Forum for kvinnelige yrkesfiskere (Forum for Professional Women Fishers) headed by Trude Karlsen Halvorsen. They formed a Facebook group, and one of the participants, Anne-Lise Ekrem, also launched a weblog (see <http://rosabloegger.blogg.no/>).

The participants in the meeting at Alta decided not to form a separate fisheries association. They continue to work as a forum. They decided to join already existing organisations, like the Norges Fiskarlag (Fishermen's Association). Subsequently, some of the Forum representatives met with representatives of Norges Fiskarlag, who showed willingness to work with issues of special concern for women fishers. These included recruitment of women in fisheries, access to finance for women fishers, and the special challenges of being a fisher or boat owner and a mother with young children.

The Forum has focused on other problems as well. For instance, it has been in communication with Norwegian Labour and

Welfare Administration (NAV), an important public institution dealing with a wide range of welfare rights. The results of this engagement are yet to materialise.

To conclude, the experiences from earlier initiatives show that there is a long way to go to go to realise the rights of women fishers, especially in a period of professionalisation, regulation and privatisation. However, this is a period when the income from fishing is relatively good, compared to women's income from other employment and opportunities elsewhere, and more women than earlier are considering taking up fishing. There is therefore the need to press with these initiatives.

Experience shows that it is difficult to bring changes in a profession that is so closely connected to men's work and masculinity, locally, nationally and internationally. The Forum with its young and hard-working women members can, however, make a difference.

Fortunately, they are not alone in this journey. Internationally, women, as well as some men and some institutions, are aware of the importance of women's participation and contribution to the fishery sector and fishery communities. The combined efforts of all these concerned groups can result in better opportunities and working conditions for women in the sector, more women-oriented fishery politics and policy-making, and greater representation for women in influential positions. ❏