Women in fisheries

Changing the locks

As men hang on to the keys to the future of fisheries, Norwegian women find little voice in decisionmaking

The marine Arctic is rich in fishery resources. Marine fisheries play a major role in the economy, settlement, history and culture of many Arctic peoples and communities. Four of the Arctic countries—US, Denmark, Canada and Norway—are also major fish exporters.

Fisheries is often regarded as a 'masculine' sector. Most fishers are men, and the fishing industry and boats are run and owned by men. But that doesn't mean that women are not concerned with fisheries: Many women work in the processing and equipment industry, and a few women are also fishers themselves. In coastal communities, women play an important role in the fishers' families, being both involved in work of a caring nature, and as administrators for the family's fishing boats. Also, women not directly involved in the fisheries sector play a central role in maintaining and changing coastal societies and various social institutions.

For a long time, the different roles of coastal women directly or indirectly involved in fisheries were invisible. But thanks to many studies done in different countries, women's important roles in the fishery sector and coastal communities have been illuminated and documented. In this presentation, I will not focus on where women are present in the fishery sector. I will, rather, focus on where women are not present. That is, not surprisingly, in decision-making processes and other positions of power related to fisheries.

Globally, most fish stocks are either fully exploited or overexploited. Overall, catches peaked in the 1970s or 1980s and have since declined. This is also the situation in Arctic fisheries. Major fish stocks have declined to a level close to collapse, like the Norwegian spring spawning herring in the 1960s and the North Sea cod and the Barents Sea cod in the late 1980s. Some stocks have totally collapsed, like the Newfoundland cod in 1992.

Collapse or serious declines in major fish stocks are seriously affecting local communities and families dependent on fisheries. This was painfully experienced in northern Norway during the resource crisis in the Barents Sea at the end of the 1980s, but it was still just a little breeze compared with the 1992 cod collapse in Newfoundland. After an almost total fishing moratorium for 10 years, the cod stock has still not recovered. Hundreds of fishing villages have collapsed, young people have left their communities and many families are socially and economically destroyed. What started as an ecological and economic crisis, fast turned into a social catastrophe.

As experienced both in Norway and Newfoundland, coastal women became 'first-line soldiers' in facing the social consequences of the fishery crisis. Many would agree that women took the main burden in order to cope with the different ways the social crisis hit them: How to handle the family household with a major fall in income? How to support your husband who has lost his daily means of livelihood? How to keep together social institutions in the local community? How to preserve the family's and community's dignity? Faced with the social consequences of the fishery crisis, in order to get by, women organized families in, and across, local communities.

New solutions

However, what women did to solve these problems, was somehow expected and

nothing new. The crisis only made their roles more visible.

What was new—at least in Norway—was that women entered new roles by challenging the political mismanagement that led to the crisis. Fisheries management was no longer accepted as a monopoly for men. Fisheries management was no longer limited to biology or economy.

Fisheries management became highly politicized. Overfishing has to do with unsustainable development. Overfishing has to do with taking risks. Overfishing has to do with stealing others' livelihoods. Overfishing is giving rights to some, and marginalizing others. Overfishing creates winners and losers. The victims of overfishing are not necessarily those who caused it. In Norway, these assumptions were, for the first time, challenged by women. But their demands and questions were not always welcomed by the establishment.

A common perception regarding fisheries management is that scientific knowledge about the marine environment, along with management models and catch control, is crucial for sustainable resource management. Indeed, it is in the Arctic countries that you find the world's most expensive and advanced fishery research and management systems. But in spite of this, people in the coastal Arctic are facing serious fisheries mismanagement and resource crises.

The Barents Sea crisis 12 years ago was mainly a result of too much fishing pressure. The joint Norwegian-Russian Fishery Commission's policy was simply too risky. It ignored and exceeded the scientific quota recommendations that were too optimistic and based on too many uncertain factors. A similar situation was present in Canada. The scientists overestimated the cod stock, while the authorities ignored the uncertainties. Unregulated fishing by European Union (EU) vessels beyond the Canadian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) made the situation even worse. It is necessary to note that neither Canadian nor Norwegian and Russian marine scientists knew the critical level for collapse of the cod stocks. I don't think they know it today either. What we know for sure is that the Newfoundland cod collapsed. The Barents Sea cod got one more chance.

Barents sea crisis

How did the Norwegian and Russian authorities utilize this chance? The Barents Sea crisis was followed by political promises of a more sustainable fishery management. The Norwegian government and parliament promised that control would be strengthened, overcapacity in the fishing fleet reduced,

and scientific recommendations followed when setting future quotas. It all started well. The cod stock recovered after a few years, and the Norwegian government even stated that Norway was the number one fishery manager in the world. Optimism rose in the fishery sector. So did the investments. On the Russian side came the market economy, and the increasing importance of cod as a source of export revenue.

What really happened in the 1990s was that the Barents Sea cod stock recovered and then declined, at a tempo we have never seen before. The fishing pressure reached its highest level ever—almost three times higher than the level recommended by the researchers. For the last five years, the cod stock has been beyond safe biological limits, or below the precautionary level set by the researchers. In addition, spawning has failed in the same period, according to the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES). How was a new period of mismanagement allowed to happen?

To put it in simple facts:

1. The scientists are still systematically overestimating the stock and thus recommending too high quotas.

2. The tendency to set the total allowable catch (TAC) higher than that recommended by the scientists has increased during the 1990s.

3. The authorities fail to control the fishing effort: The catch is systematically higher than reported and thus exceeds the TAC.

In 1997-98, both the Norwegian parliament and the joint Norwegian-Russian Fishery Commission decided that the quota setting and fishery management should be based on the precautionary approach. But, paradoxically, the discrepancy between recommended and agreed quotas reached its highest level after this. So did the fishing pressure.

Figures showing the level of fishing mortality and the discrepancy between quotas recommended by ICES and the TACs agreed on, illustrate the will to take risks in the management of the northeast Arctic cod.

Fishing mortality is a measure of how many of the cod between five and 10 years of age are fished during the year. The precautionary level of fishing mortality recommended by ICES is at or below 0.42. The fishing mortality level associated with stock collapse is defined to be at or above 0.70. For 16 of the last 20 years, the fishing pressure has been in the latter category (see Figure on page 11).

The crisis in Canada established three important recognitions. The first is the possibility of extending or causing a long-term collapse in a fish stock. The second is the uncertainty connected with scientific marine research.

The third is that fisheries management is not only affecting fishers and the industry, but also families, entire communities and ways of life. The latter can be illustrated by the change in birth rate after the Newfoundland cod collapse. From being the North American region with the highest birth rate 10 years ago, Newfoundland and Labrador now have the lowest.

The first Barents Sea cod crisis, and the collapse of the Newfoundland cod stock, could—to a certain level—be defined as a result of lack of knowledge.

But the mismanagement of the Barents Sea cod stock in the 1990s happened openly, in spite of economic logic, in spite of drastic experiences, in spite of scientific recommendations, and in spite of knowledge about scientists' tendency to overestimate the stock. Paradoxically, the will to take risks has increased after the crisis, and, at the highest level, after the adoption of the precautionary approach.

Quotas set

An important question then is: Who set the quotas? Who has got the right to define the level of risk taken to manage natural resources that so many local communities depend on? The quota policy in the Barents Sea is decided in yearly bilateral negotiations between Russia and Norway. In both countries, representatives from

'concerned groups' are not only consulted, but participate directly, both in the national process of preparing the negotiations, and during the negotiations themselves.

A study I did in this field showed that concerned groups represented in the Norwegian quota policy play a crucial role in defining the Norwegian position before and under the bilateral quota negotiations. A similar study on the Russian decision-making process, done by other researchers, gave the same conclusions. In both countries, 'concerned groups' have exercised a major pressure in order to get higher quotas.

The 1992 United Nations Agenda 21 states that women, together with indigenous peoples, small-scale fishers and local communities, are important groups for a sustainable fishery management.

The 1995 UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks requires that concerned groups should be given access to information and participation in decision-making bodies managing straddling and highly migrating fish stocks. Lately, the trend is to include gender distribution as one of the social indicators that define sustainable fishery management. Hence, it is in accordance with international legislation and international norms to include women in fishery management.

As a modern coastal State and a country well known for its progressive gender policy, Norway—many would expect—would include women in fishery management, not only because of the international legislation and norms just referred to, but also because of the Norwegian equal opportunities law, which states that 40 per cent of each gender shall be represented in public committees and decision-making processes. Yet, the entire Norwegian fishery sector is heavily dominated by men.

At the resource management level, the Norwegian government is living with permanent exceptions from the equal opportunities law. Neither in decision-making processes on total quotas nor in processes where national quotas are distributed, are women among the actors representing the concerned groups. Resource management is simply none of our business, it would seem.

Concerned groups

The reason for this is seen in how the authorities define the concept 'concerned groups' in fisheries. Concerned groups who are consulted and given the right to participate in the quota policy are defined as owners of the fish processing plants, the fishermen's association and the labour union organizing the trawler crew. This means that 'concerned groups' are limited to some particular interests that are

directly involved with fisheries. These particular interests are all dominated by men.

As a result, women are not regarded as a 'concerned group' in resource management. In addition, major parts of the decision-making processes have no transparency. To sum up, women are not only excluded from being able to influence resource management, they are also denied information about the decision-making process.

Knowledge is power. But the right to define knowledge and to define the need for knowledge brings even more power. Who is controlling the knowledge level in the Norwegian fishery sector?

In spite of many well-educated women in fishery research, men control major parts of this field. Two years ago, the government established the Fisheries and Aquaculture Research Foundation. This foundation is yearly managing and distributing around 100 mn Norwegian kroners (around US$13.3 mn) for fishery research.

Indeed, the money used for different kinds of fishery research plays a major role in the definition of political perspective and focus on the fishery sector. Should, for example, the bulk of the money be reserved for export- and technology-oriented research projects, or should it rather be used for projects oriented towards long-term resource management and development of rural areas dependent on fisheries?

Of course, the determinant factor is who the government asks to sit on the foundation board. They found only one woman, against six men. They had to set aside the equal opportunities law. Here again, the reason is how the authorities define 'concerned groups'.

Also, at the knowledge level, 'concerned groups' are defined as particular groups directly involved in the fisheries, and hence dominated by men. In other words, in the definition of the knowledge needed for the future marine sector in Norway, women are not regarded as a 'concerned group'.

A similar example can be given from a scenario project called 'Marine Norway 2020', promoted and financed by the Norwegian authorities and the fishing industry. The aim of the project was to define three different visions for marine Norway in 2020. Only five women were among the 45 persons who gave inputs to the process. The importance of this project is not for its prediction of the marine future. The importance is based on how the process is defining ideas and perceptions for the future fisheries, which, in turn, will influence the sector's policy development. What will be legitimate ideas and perceptions, and what will not? Anyhow, Norwegian women were not regarded as relevant contributors in developing the visions for the future marine Norway. Can we hope to be included after 2020?

Capital and leadership are also sources of power. Not surprisingly, the Norwegian fishing industry is owned by men. It is also men who administer the sector. But what about the new and booming aquaculture industry? Isn't it modern? Hasn't it included women? Well, the new leader of the fish farmers association is a woman. Other than that, the sector is heavily dominated by men. Along with the rationalization and industrialization in the 1990s, most of the women disappeared from the sector. It was mainly women with routine jobs who became redundant. At the top level, there are few women. When the leaders are recruiting new leaders, they often do it as an internal process. When they make external announcements, they ask for leadership experiences in the fish-farming sector. As a result, it is very difficult for women to get top positions in the sector.

Fish farming

The Norwegian fishing industry is the second largest national export industry. With the booming fish farming, the sector has also become ambitious, even with a vision of taking over the economic role of the oil industry when the oil boom era is over. Similar roles and visions are present for the fishery sector in other Arctic coastal States and areas too. At the same time, coastal Arctic people have experienced that the fisheries sector is extremely vulnerable, not least because of challenges to the management of the resources.

A common feature for many fishing communities in the Arctic is marginalization, caused by both overfishing and liberalization of fisheries legislation. In particular, these processes hit the traditional and small-scale communities, indigenous peoples and the social structures keeping coastal communities together.

In marine Norway, men control the natural resources, the major terms of knowledge production and leadership. They have the whole bunch of keys to terms and choices for the future marine Norway. Without having studied the situation in other Arctic countries, I will not state that Norway is representative of gender distribution in the entire Arctic fishery sector. But my feeling is that the situation is more or less the same.

For example, the Canadian Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, established in 1993, consists of 13 men. The council's objective is, to quote the mandate, "help the government achieve its conservation, economic and social objectives for the fishery". This includes public recommendations to the Minister on such issues as quotas for the Atlantic fishery as well as Canada's position in international management bodies such as the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization. Further, according to the mandate, "members are chosen on merit and standing in the community". Note that the council and its mandate were defined after the 1992 cod collapse, in a situation where the social catastrophe had become apparent. Haven't women enough merit and standing in coastal Canada to be regarded as appropriate advisers in the management of fishery resources? Is resource management none of their business? Why are fishery policy and resource management Arctic women's business?

Because women in the coastal Arctic depend on fisheries, just as much as men do. Because all of the Arctic countries are democracies, where women count as half of the citizens. Because UN recommendations and legislation state that 'concerned groups' should have access to information and participation in resource management bodies. Because the gentlemen managing the fish resources today haven't really convinced us that they do a good enough job. Because the future fishery sector and the well-being of the communities dependent on fisheries are not sufficiently taken care of by a monoculture of men, joining together in meeting after meeting, confirming their own perceptions. It is neither democratic nor healthy.

Sustainable development

Gender distribution is a matter of sharing power, responsibility and resources. It is also a matter of promoting welfare and sustainable development. The latter is at

the core of the ideas of the Arctic Council. I challenge the members of the Arctic Council to initiate a project to focus on Arctic women's role in resource management.

First of all, we need to collect data to document and compare Arctic women's role in natural resource management. Secondly, we need to develop new models for the design of management bodies, in order to include women in the development of the Arctic natural resource-based sectors.

The Arctic future depends on how we are able to manage our natural resources. As we so dearly have experienced, a fishery is more than mere boats, export value and tonnes. Fish is community, fish is family, fish is food. Fish is history and future, business and culture. Fish is power and welfare, conflict and peace, sorrow and happiness, rights and obligations.

This calls for a widening of our perceptions about the scope of the fishery sector. That includes a change in the definition of 'concerned groups' in the design of decision-making bodies shaping the marine Arctic future.

As long as women are disregarded as a 'concerned group' in the fishery sector, we will not be able to influence the development of the fisheries. As long as men control all the keys to the marine Arctic future, coastal women's role is limited to facing the consequences of men's decisions.

So, what do you do when somebody has taken all the keys? You change the locks!

This is a slightly edited version of a paper by Bente Aasjord (baasjord@online.no) presented at the Conference on Gender Equality and Women in the Arctic Council, 3-6 August 2002, at Saariselkä, Finland