

Women in fisheries

## A room to stretch out in

**A recent workshop discussed the challenges of gender and coping strategies in African fishing communities**

**D**espite the many studies that have been conducted on African fisheries, much of the work performed by women and the social spaces they occupy have remained invisible. The lack of documentation on women's role in the sector can be explained by a number of factors. Firstly, production goals (traditionally, a 'male' space) continue to dominate national policy agendas rather than the processing and marketing sector (a 'female' space). Secondly, research is often gender-blind and fails to see the bigger livelihoods picture — women are often excluded from the decisionmaking process for cultural reasons. And thirdly, at the national level, there is no desegregation of data along gender lines, making it doubly difficult to extract information pertinent to the fisheries sector in general, and to gender in particular.

Since the mid-20th century, economic reforms, environmental degradation and increased globalization have forced fishing communities to continuously develop coping strategies to secure their livelihoods. The key to understanding how communities deal with shocks to their livelihoods is by obtaining a clear picture of how men and women interact and how gender defines their room to manoeuvre within a changing environment.

In December 2003, a workshop entitled *Room to Manoeuvre: Gender and Coping Strategies in the Fisheries Sector* was organized in Cotonou, Benin to contribute to the debate on the role of gender in fisheries. The workshop was funded by the European Commission and organized by IDDRA UK and the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP), based in Cotonou. The workshop brought together 14

participants from Europe (France and Madeira) and Africa (Guinea, the Gambia, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, and Tanzania), representing fisheries organizations, universities, research, administration, development, and non-governmental organizations.

The workshop had two objectives: bring into the open knowledge on the roles and social spaces occupied by women in the fisheries sector and explore how coping strategies are formed and how they have evolved in African fishing communities. The output of the workshop was a series of recommendations on how policy could be adapted to empower women and men in fishing communities to meet the ever-increasing challenges they face today. The approach adopted was to examine the challenges faced by fisheries-dependent communities, and identify the coping strategies devised by women to confront them.

The workshop recognized that fishing is a precarious occupation, and success is often dictated by elements beyond the control of the community (weather, fish stock status, and so on). Yet, the present generation believes it is facing more challenges of greater magnitude than their forebears. For the most part, the worsening social and economic conditions impact negatively on gender relations in fishing communities.

### **New challenges**

The challenges identified by the workshop were: globalization, which is bringing benefits to some quarters, but is also pushing the cost of fish beyond the reach of many household budgets; increased demand for fish as a result of population explosion/forced migration, which reduces women's negotiation capacity during lean seasons, as well

household food security; lack of control over assets and space (Though access to assets was not a problem, many cited the problem of men moving into traditional 'female' spaces as profits from trading rose); environmental problems such as pollution, floods, drought and coastal erosion; bad fishing practices (illegal gear, fishing in shallow waters, and so on) fully addressed by the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible fisheries for some time now; and health issues, especially HIV/AIDS, a recently recognized phenomenon in the fishing communities where SFLP is currently working in Benin and Congo.

These challenges almost invariably impact upon the ability of households and communities to create sustainable livelihoods. Most of these challenges are not peculiar to Africa. Fishers' wives in Brazil also have difficulty putting food on the table, and those who do fish to provide food for their family are not acknowledged as fishers. The idea that women could fish for commercial gain is anathema to their husbands and male relatives. The result is that these women have difficulty organizing themselves officially around their fishing activities, which are considered part of their household chores rather than a serious economic venture. Fishing-dependent communities in West Africa have adopted a wide variety of methods of coping with these new challenges, and it was clear that most challenges could be better tackled

through a gender perspective whose strategic role is largely ignored or underestimated to date.

Women were seeking to improve their knowledge base so that they can run their businesses better. They are trying to gain improved access to the fisheries management decision-making process, to strengthen their support institutions, and improve literacy and numeracy skills. Credit schemes are being widely used to ease the burden of dips in income streams, but they are still difficult to access and unreliable.

Setting up alternative businesses was widely mentioned at the workshop. The case study from Niger was particularly interesting. An ecological challenge (drought) forced a radical change in fishing practices (from catching to aquaculture) in Tafouka, a fisheries community not far from Niamey. In implementing a community project on aquaculture financed by the SFLP, women and men were forced to collaborate more closely. Today, women's participation in decision making in the community has improved significantly, and the financial benefits now shift between the men and women's groups.

#### **Financial barriers**

But many West African communities face structural and financial barriers—limited access to credit and lack of institutional

support for women's organizations—that prevent effective development of coping strategies. These were the two obstacles most frequently mentioned by participants.

**A**nother very relevant strategy that was common to Africa and Brazil was prostitution. In desperate financial straits, after being abandoned for months on end by their husbands, some Brazilian fishers' wives have been known to trade sexual services to guarantee fish supply. In other instances, women are employed on fishing vessels for menial tasks and as prostitutes for the use of the crew. Whether this was a strategy or just a desperate measure remains a highly debated point.

One of the key themes that ran throughout the workshop was the need for improved institutions. Women's institutional organizations vary widely throughout the region.

Some countries had good institutional structures that were, however, poorly supported (Senegal, for example) and others had poor organizations or none at all (The Gambia and Guinea, for example). Organizations are often an important entry point for development initiatives and the degree of capacity of the organizations will have an impact on the success of any development initiatives and their uptake.

To make gender coping strategies more effective, policymakers have to be aware of the problems and know how to help remove constraints. But, for this to happen, the workshop recommended that some basic baseline data be first collected. The level and quality of data on gender in fisheries communities needs to be improved too. Through participatory gender diagnostics, more disaggregated gender and fisheries data needs to be collected.

Secondly, information on the extent of gender-based institutions needs to be collected. Little is known, at the moment, about the number of women's institutions or the remit of these institutions. Thirdly, evaluation and monitoring tools for gender-based projects are required to ensure a more efficient lesson-learning and experience-sharing system. Fourthly, the development of a database on social and gender aspects of livelihoods at the ministerial level was considered very important in ensuring that real progress is made towards the integration of gender in livelihoods development.

#### **Gender focus**

Finally, the importance of promoting a gender focal point at the ministerial level was highly recommended, as was the creation of forums at the national level to raise awareness on gender equity and its relevance in the achievement of development goals.

Limited in time, there was only so much that the workshop could achieve. What it has done, however, is to lay the foundations for future work in this area. The workshop clearly demonstrated that gender does matter to the development process. Although many of the problems discussed (inequity, injustice, access to resources, control of benefits and so on) are not unique to gender or to fisheries, it would be a mistake to discount them from the fisheries policy framework. All these problems can be usefully tackled from a gender perspective that has at its foundation the goal of solving inequities. Such a methodology may not solve the problem overnight, but it will surely go a long way to uncovering some of the root causes of poverty in fishing communities. There is considerable political will to take these issues forward and if networks, such as those set up by the workshop, can mobilize coordination and cooperation among those working on the ground, great progress will be made in this area of West Africa.

Further information on the workshop can be found in the SFLP Bulletin ([www.sflp.org/eng/007/pub1/index.html](http://www.sflp.org/eng/007/pub1/index.html)). For more information on the work of the SFLP, visit [www.sflp.org](http://www.sflp.org). ♣

This article is by Elizabeth Bennett (Bennett@iddra.org) of IDDRA UK Ltd and Kofo Olomu (kofo.olomu@sflp-pmedp.firstnet.bj) of SFLP, Cotonou