

# Reform Agenda for Empowering Women

**A study of three fishing communities shows only with empowerment can women occupy positions of power in fisheries cooperatives**

**W**hat do young fisherwomen in Belize need? How can decent work and empowerment come to them? A collaboration among three bodies addressed these questions; they included the Belize Fishermen Cooperative Association (BFCA), the International Collective in Support of

As of September 2020, there are 2,953 registered commercial fisherfolk in Belize, of whom 72 are women. In addition, women are employed in fish-processing activities; many were employed in shrimp trawling and farming before the early mortality syndrome (EMS) hit vannamei shrimp farming in Belize.

Women display strong responsibility towards improving the structures of fishing organizations. They have to share additional responsibilities alongside domestic duties. All fishers in Belize, both women and men, enjoy equal rights. They use similar licences and operate in the same areas while abiding by the country's fisheries laws.

In September-October 2020, BFCA executive director Sydney Fuller, a fisher himself, along with Nadine Nembhard, administrative officer of the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organizations, visited three fishing communities in the Corozal District of Belize. Situated in the northern part of Belize, it had 783 licensed fisherfolk as of September 2020. The fishing communities visited were Sarteneja, Copper Bank and Chunox. In addition, they visited the two fish exporting cooperatives located in the Belize District, which has 1,209 licensed fisherfolk as of September 2020. The National Fishermen Cooperative Society Ltd and the Northern Fishermen Cooperative Society Ltd receive lobster and conch for local consumption and export.

There are many fisherwomen in Sarteneja village. Only 15 women were interviewed from the 4,500 inhabitants.

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Fishworkers (ICSF) and CoopeSoliDar RL. In addition, the organizations proposed to enhance the knowledge of young women in Belizean fisheries.

BFCA functions like a bridge between the Government of Belize (GOB) and the commercial fishing industry. The issues covered include legislation, and social and economic matters pertaining to commercial fishing since its inception on October 23, 1970. The BFCA board members consist of bona fide fishers from the only three existing fishing cooperatives, as also other fishers who are not members of the cooperatives. BFCA is the only true voice of the Belizean commercial fisherfolk.

Women are involved in the job of capturing molluscs (conch), crustaceans (lobster) and finfish in the intertidal zones, shallow waters and reefs for subsistence and export. Three per cent of licensed fishers are women.

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NADINE NEMBHARD/ BELIZE FISHERMEN COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION



National Fishermen Cooperative Society Limited, Belize. Women display strong responsibility towards improving the structures of fishing organizations

The women were very receptive and seemed accustomed to visitors and possible projects that can improve income. There are two different tourist businesses in the village: homestays and fishing tours. In homestays, the women refurbish their homes with comfortable rooms to accommodate visiting tourists. Fishing tours involve their husbands who take the tourists out fishing. The women prepare fish meals for the tourists, sell their fish catch at the markets and clean the fish traps. The women hope to expand their business by adding more rooms, private bathrooms and improved kitchens featuring new refrigerators and microwave ovens.

Chunox, a popular fishing village in the Corozal District, is located on the east bank of Laguna Seca, towards the south end of the lagoon. According to the 2000 census, Chunox had a population of 1,143 and is still a small village. At least half of the community is made up of fisherfolk. Women in Chunox traditionally undertake tasks like cooking and sewing. Job

opportunities are scarce so they try to make ends meet by opening small shops, and planting vegetables and other produce for sale. The majority of the women are housewives who take care of their children. But times are changing and the women are now interested in finding work outside the home. One woman interviewed said she is not comfortable depending on her husband. She has opened a small business at home by selling groceries and clothing. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she had to suspend a small business at the local school that was providing snacks for the students. As the deputy chairperson of the village, she is interested in supporting her community by providing training opportunities for the other women so that they can contribute financially to their households.

#### **Generations-old tradition**

Another fisherwoman and her family shared their generations-old tradition of catching fish. In a school of fish, there will always be one specific fish,

small or big, that will bring luck. That is put in a bottle of seawater, and each time the family member returns from the sea, the biggest fish is fed with blood. This is supposed to guarantee a good catch during future fishing trips.

Copper Bank, the third community visited, is a fishing village with a population of 500, of whom 150 are fisherfolk. The women are involved in small businesses preparing food for sale. Several young women are interested in setting up their own businesses outside the village. This is because the population is too small to accommodate any more businesses locally. Some of the women add value to the fish products, while others try to run Internet cafes and beauty salons.

Barbara Bradley, General Manager at the National Fishermen Cooperative Society Ltd (NFC), reminisces about

part of their payment on delivery and the balance shortly after the close of the fishing season. Bradley believes, the two cooperatives in Belize need to work together for the betterment of the industry.

The second visit to NFC was to the processing plant. Fuller interacted with the women to find out their perception of their role as women in the fishing industry. The women responded that they like their jobs for the income they provide for their households. They added that they are proud of Bradley, their general manager, and many expressed ambitions to one day step into her shoes.

Maria Allen, a fisherwoman and manager at the NFC plant in Caye Caulker, who has been fishing for over 15 years, said that her dad was a fisher himself and a founding member of NFC. She learnt a lot about fishing by going out to sea with her father from an early age. She was the one who introduced her husband to fishing. They now have two grown-up sons who fish with them. Together, they build their own lobster traps and go fishing in both shallow waters and the deep sea, sometimes also for conch.

Robert Usher, NFC's general manager, said that he has been working almost all his adult life at this cooperative. After graduating with a degree in marketing, he has worked here since 1976 and has participated in the many struggles. The future of fishing depends entirely upon how we conserve the resource and the cooperative movement will survive despite the problems, he added.

Jaime Velasquez, plant manager of NFC, said that they employ 18-20 permanent workers in the processing plant and 12-14 additional seasonal workers, all women. In June they hire the seasonal workers who work for five to six months. The working hours are from 7 am to 7 pm, with several breaks totalling an hour and a half. The off-season timings are from 7:30 am to 5 pm, with a total of two hours of breaks per day. The peak work occurs during the first four to six weeks of the lobster and conch seasons.

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the countless opportunities provided through educational grants to the children of cooperative members, ranging from those in high school to those in junior college. Some recipients eventually seek employment outside the sector and land jobs as lawyers, doctors and bankers. Unfortunately, in 2020, the scholarship grant programme will come to an end. To run a successful cooperative, Bradley reminds us, one must remember that the most important people in the community are the fisherfolk who are loyal to the cooperative. Over the past 53 years of its existence, the society has been solvent and members have been receiving good returns for their investments. Bradley believes the fisherfolk leaders should be trained in basic computer skills.

This year the cooperative is paying 100 per cent up front for all marine product sales, the result of a price war with the private sector players. Earlier, the fishers were able to get a

### Senior member

Geraldine Usher, NFC's most senior processing staff member, is now 60 years old. She has been with the cooperative since the age of 17. She has been packing lobster for many years and says she can do her job with her eyes closed. She adds that her work is at times frustrating, yet she loves her work. She believes it is better to have a secure job than to be unemployed. Too many unemployed young women, she says, are vulnerable to exploitation because of their need to survive. Usher encourages young women to seek employment in the fishing industry, even if part-time.

The women's work in processing lobster tails and conches is strenuous. The cooperative currently processes two 20-foot containers, amounting to an average weekly output of 40,000-42,000 lb. The women work every day, including Saturdays and Sundays. Currently, they are processing 7,000 lb to 9,000 lb of conches per day. No other processing plant in Belize has been able to consistently match that level of production.

Those hired over the past decade are very committed in this work routine, fitting into different roles in the cooperative as cleaners, packers and secretaries. The plant manager is proud of his motivated employees who often work late and even on weekends. Without them operations would come to a standstill, he said.

Most of the permanent full-time employees have been working at the cooperative for 10 years or more and are part of its development. Their inter-relationships are good and most of the women know each other well. They are eligible for all social security benefits.

The needs of the women in the three fishing communities studied are similar: Skills training, education and capacity building, microfinance options and training in information and communications technology (ICT).

One recommendation for BFCA is the refurbishment of its existing building to make office space available for rental, which will bring additional income.



Maria Allen building lobster traps, Caye Caulker, Belize. The women prepare fish meals for the tourists, sell their fish catch at the markets and clean the fish traps

The study revealed that though the women in the sector are able and willing to participate in the fisheries value chain, they need training and capacity building. Otherwise, the predominance of men in leadership positions, even in households, will continue. Only the empowerment of women can make visible their leadership skills and potential. ♣

#### For more

##### **Belize Fishermen Cooperative Association**

<https://www.facebook.com/Belize-Fishermen-Cooperative-Association-276086746385152/>

##### **Belize: Free to Move**

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/78-4332-Free-to-Move.html>

##### **National Fisher's Co-Op**

<https://www.nationalfisherscoop.com/>

##### **Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organizations (CNFO)**

<https://cnfo.fish/>