

Africa/ Mozambique

A more central role

The women in the Bay of Maputo are at the heart of the local fisheries economy. However, despite their vital economic role they have not yet been given their rightful place in local fisheries management.

By Rouja Johnstone, Consultant on Gender in Artisanal Fisheries

The Bay of Maputo is an example of how modern urban life in Mozambique has influenced the local artisanal fisheries communities and has contributed to an increasing recognition of the role women play in the local economy. Due to the proximity of city markets and a growing demand for fish products, fisheries is good business for many local men and women.

The Bay of Maputo has five main fishing centres—at Costa do Sol, Muntanhane, Catembe, Matola and Inhaca Island. In all of these, both men and women are engaged in fishing or fish marketing. The majority of the women collect crustaceans and inter-tidal bivalves, which are destined for the city markets and door-to-door selling as well as for family consumption.

As a result of their successful economic activities and interest in reinvesting their savings into artisanal fisheries, more and more women are now boatowners, forming about 25 per cent of all boatowners. They employ local fishermen and thus create a job market that is dynamic and also perceived to be fair.

Most women who own boats, fish or trade at the beach, are part of a complex chain of intermediaries (*maguevas*) and form an important socioeconomic network that supplies the city with fresh fish. Some of these women have developed partnerships amongst themselves whilst others work on their own but all benefit from the close proximity of the urban market economy.

The economic activities of women fish traders are dependent on the successful harvest by local fishermen as well as their interest in doing business together. In the case of Inhaca Island for example, fishermen claim that they prefer to do business with the local women, as they see them as trustworthy and reliable partners, whose activities ultimately benefit their own local communities.

The existing complementary division of labour and responsibilities is an important element of the life of artisanal fisheries communities. The socioeconomic links that underpin it are informal and often based on traditional or family relationships.

Thus, for this balance to be preserved and prosperity to be sustainable, these factors have to be taken into careful consideration in any development intervention. For example, project interventions that encourage the private sector to wholesale fishery products directly from the fishermen, have had a negative impact on women's economic niche, resulting in loss of livelihood.

Despite their economic contribution, women are not formally organized or represented in fisher associations or co-management committees. They are not yet recognized as important players in the artisanal fisheries sector and are often not consulted in the decision-making process.

Their exclusion from the formal organs of local management is in sharp contrast with their social and economic contribution and it reflects a traditionalist and outdated form of community-based management further supported by the nature of government and other external interventions that overlook the issue of gender.

At the formal level of community organization, women are still poorly represented or invisible, while at the informal day-to-day level, in many of the fishing communities relations between men and women have changed.

Due to their increasing economic power and the need for a joint effort in providing for the family, women need to become more visibly involved in public life, and their dynamic and complex role in fisheries recognized.

This lack of involvement does not always stem from the attitudes of the fishing community but is also a characteristic of outside interventions by NGOs and government institutions. The main objective of these is to promote sustainable development and support the organization, and effective functioning of, local management bodies. However, government interventions in formalizing and strengthening these management bodies largely disregard the gender division of labour and overlook the crucial role women play in fisheries.

In conclusion, based on the observations made regarding the fishing activities and community organization in the Bay of Maputo, there is an urgent need for a gender debate and the elaboration of a gender strategy that could guide sector interventions and which, above all, ensures the promotion of a sustainable and equitable development.

This will benefit the community as a whole and should further strengthen existing socioeconomic realities. Women can no longer be marginalized in the decision-making process and now need to take on a more central role in existing management structures.

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