

Africa/ Benin

Room to Manoeuvre

A recent workshop in Africa explored the coping strategies being adopted by women of fisheries-dependent households

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Despite the many studies that have been conducted in African fisheries, much of the work performed by women and the social space they occupy, has remained invisible. This is because most studies concentrate on production (often the primary goal of national fisheries policies), a typically male activity, leaving women out of the picture. Research is also often gender-blind, and researchers simply do not see that women play a role in fishing livelihoods. But perhaps one of the biggest reasons that women remain invisible is that women do not count: data for fisheries rarely distinguishes between male and female activity.

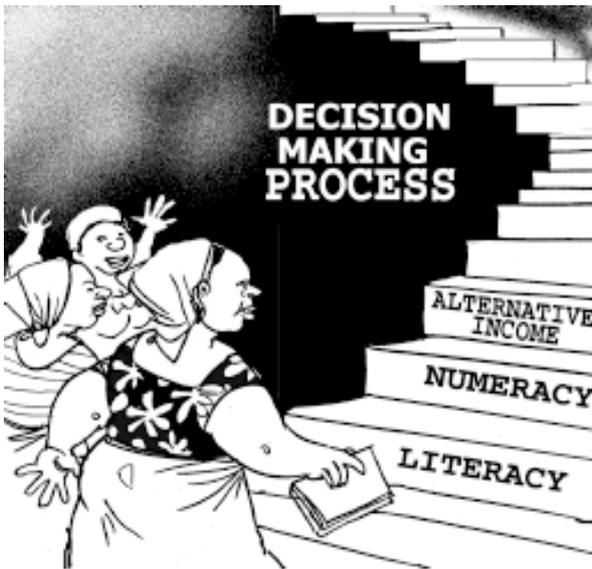
Mindful of these problems, and keen to throw the spotlight on women in fishing communities, a workshop was held in Cotonou, Benin in West Africa in December 2003. The workshop, titled *Room to Manoeuvre: Gender and Coping Strategies in the Fisheries Sector*, was funded by the European Commission and was organized by IDDRA UK and the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP), based in Cotonou. The workshop brought together 14 participants from Europe (France, Madeira) and Africa (Guinea, the Gambia, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, and Tanzania). Participants represented fisheries organizations, universities, research, administration, development, and non-governmental organizations.

The workshop had two objectives: first, to highlight the roles and social space occupied by women in the fisheries sector; and, second, because so little is known about how female roles are changing, to explore how these women formed coping strategies to deal with the changes that are affecting the sector.

There is little denying that fishing is a precarious occupation and success is often dictated by elements beyond the control of the community. But it would appear that the present generation believes it is facing more challenges of greater magnitude than their

forebears. These challenges come not just from smaller catches and increased competition for fish, but from worsening social and economic conditions, increased globalization, environmental problems such as pollution, floods, drought and coastal erosion, and HIV/AIDS that is particularly affecting communities in West Africa. These challenges are not unique to Africa, nor are they unique to fishing. They are problems that surface in all continents and are associated with poverty in many other sectors too.

So how are women in fishing-dependent communities in West Africa coping with these challenges? Through a series of presentations and discussions, the workshop found that they have adopted a wide variety of methods of meeting these new challenges. Women are using traditional ways of generating alternative income through micro-enterprise ventures (beer brewing and small-scale aquaculture, for example) but, more interestingly, they are seeking to improve their knowledge base so that they can run their businesses better. They are taking up the literacy and numeracy skills training being offered by NGOs and, not only are they using these skills to improve their income generation, but to gain improved access to the fisheries management decision-making process. Despite the critical link between the catching sector and the processing sector, women rarely have any input to the management process. Above all, women are seeking ways to strengthen their support institutions: to ensure that their organizations are able to run effectively and help them in times of need. As we might expect, credit schemes are being widely used to ease the burden of dips in income, but it was argued that men are in greater need of access to credit than women.



Although there are clearly several coping strategies in operation, many West African communities come up against structural and financial barriers—like limited access to credit and lack of institutional support for women’s organizations—which prevent these strategies working effectively. To help solve this problem, the workshop concluded that there was an acute need for improved institutions. Organizations are often an important entry point for development initiatives, and the degree of capacity of the organizations will have a likely impact on the success of any development initiatives and their uptake. Institutions are often ignored in development projects, but the workshop showed that, in fact, many benefits could be derived from strengthening this vital set of structures within communities.

Further information on the workshop can be found in the SFLP Bulletin: www.sflp.org/eng/007/pub1/index.html.

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