

Women's net worth

South African women struggle for their rights in traditional small-scale fisheries

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After ten years of struggle, traditional fishing communities in South Africa are finally on the brink of securing their historical fishing rights. In 2007, the Minister of Environmental Affairs signed an agreement which committed the government to developing a new policy that recognizes the rights of traditional small-scale fishers. This victory was the culmination of years of mobilization and action against a neo-liberal fishing policy based on the privatization of fishing rights and the prerogatives of the large commercial industry. Following this victory, men and women leaders from fishing communities along the coast have met to debate what kind of fishing policy they would like and how they will participate in the policy development process.



Key issues for debate have focused on the need for a community rights-based approach, founded on the principles of human rights, equality, sustainability, participation and co-management. The challenging issues of gender equality, women's rights and women's future role in traditional small-scale fisheries have been central. Clearly, policy change has emerged as a site for women's continued struggle for their rights.

Why is the value of women's role and their rights now being questioned?

Women from traditional fishing communities along South Africa's coastal stretch have always played a critical role in the harvesting

of marine resources and in household livelihood. The nature of their role, however, differs considerably from region to region. On the eastern seaboard, women can trace their harvesting of inter-tidal resources back to the Stone Age. In these areas, women and young girls are the primary harvesters of protein resources for their families. In the western and northern regions, women have traditionally played a key role in pre- and post-harvesting activities; many also work as seasonal workers in processing plants. Integration with global markets has meant a reduction in employment opportunities in these regions as the bulk of the fish and seafood catch is now processed offshore or shipped live to northern markets.

During the process of mobilization and struggle, women have been at the forefront of advocacy actions. In one region, women fishworkers formed an organization called the Women's Network in order to raise awareness about the rights of women and to continue the struggle for fishing rights. Women have been in key leadership positions in Coastal Links, the community-based network of fishing community organizations, bringing their rights to the forefront of struggle. The process has however been far from smooth.

Many male comrades are now questioning whether women should get 'equal' rights within the new fishing policy. Fierce debates have erupted, often leading to the expression of extremely negative, patriarchal and sexist stereotypes about women's roles and capabilities.

At a community meeting held last year, one man argued that his wife could not go to sea. "She is the mother of my children," he declared. Another reasoned that women's menstruation would 'bring bad luck at sea'. Also, there is confusion about what equality might mean. Are women demanding to go to sea and do the same work as men (and hence potentially taking work away from other men)? Are they demanding an equal share of the livelihood benefits of the marine economy?

Much of the tension is the result of past confusion created when the Fisheries Department allocated fishing rights. These rights were dispensed within an individualized and privatized quota rights system, which granted a limited number of rights and benefited only a small percentage of fishers. The introduction of gender equity within this limited context meant the transfer of a percentage of quota rights from

experienced traditional fishermen to women entrants. Some fishermen were now employed by women quota holders; many others were thrown out of work. The changed power relations introduced considerable tension and discomfort. Men viewed women's equal rights as no more than a denial of their own rights.

Women are now arguing strongly for the right to choose their level of involvement. This does not necessarily imply that they will all want to go to sea. Rather, they are calling for a new policy: one that adopts an integrated approach to livelihoods, provides mechanisms for women's participation in a range of related income opportunities, allows community participation and maximizes benefits for the entire community. Women are calling for a policy that recognizes not only fishers' rights but also the indivisible nature of fisher's rights from other

human rights. The challenge of developing such a policy is enormous in a context where age-old gender biases prevail and commercial companies view any attempt at evolving community-based control over nearshore resources as a threat to their interests.

In order to build alliances between women in different regions and to empower women leaders to engage in political and social debates on these issues, women representatives from fishing communities will come together on the 10th of March 2008. They will debate policy issues on their own, as well as with their male counterparts at a National Workshop for Small Scale Fishers. Hopefully, these efforts will go a long way in developing a gender-equitable, participatory and sustainable small-scale fisheries policy for South Africa. ❏

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