

Taking along the 'crewmembers'

The article argues for the need to develop a women-friendly fisheries policy based on dialogue with women of fisheries communities

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We are now in 2008—a year with fewer men and women registered in Norway's fishing industry than there were last year. In the beginning of 2007, fishing was the main occupation of 10,797 persons and the secondary occupation of 2,771 others. The start of 2008 has seen the numbers in these sectors declining by 143 and 92 respectively.

The numbers of women registered as fishers, never high to begin with, are continuously dwindling. In 1990, there were 554 women in fishing as primary occupation as against 19,921 men, and 112 women in fishing as a secondary



occupation as against 6,931 men. While figures for 2007 are not available, during 2006, the numbers of women in fishing as a primary occupation had declined to 263, and as a secondary occupation, to 102.

The ownership of fishing boats reveals similar trends. Of about 3,000 fishing boats, sized between 10 and 27.99 metres, only 23 are owned by women. This also means that very few women enjoy a boat quota.

This tendency is repeated in onshore fish production, which employs only 9,482 workers today as against 13,941 in 2000. Here, the proportion of women has declined from 44 per cent in 2000 to 41 percent today. The number of women in aquaculture is not increasing either. Women's participation has grown only in the

sectors of research, consultancy and marketing. However, there is little statistical data on this.

Imbalanced gender representation in the fisheries has been a matter of great concern for many, among them the Minister for Equality and Family Affairs in Norway's "Centre/Conservative" government: Laila Dāvøy. In 2005, she called for a meeting with the Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs to seek ways of increasing the proportion of women in the fisheries and aquaculture in compliance with Norway's Gender Equality Act.

In 2006, Helga Pedersen, a woman minister from the "Red/Green" government, took the initiative to establish a committee consisting of five women and three men from fishworkers unions and organizations, owners of aquaculture plants and fishmongers. Represented in the committee was the 'Fisherwomen's Association', a voluntary organization that works for the social and economic rights of fisherwomen and fishing families. Also represented were the Ministry for Equality and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs.

The committee was asked to come up with suggestions to increase the proportion of women in the fishing industry, in fishery-related public committees as well as in public administration. In August 2007, the committee presented the Action Plan for Increased Proportion of Women in the Marine Sector (hereafter referred to as the Action Plan). The report is currently under review.

The Action Plan formulated several goals in accordance with its mandate to increase gender representation in fisheries.

It suggested the incremental increase in the number of female fishers from 2.6 per cent in 2006 to 3 per cent in 2010, 4 per cent in 2015 and 8 per cent in 2020. Several action plans were recommended: consciousness-raising to promote gender balance; incentives for marine enterprises; strengthening recruitment to the marine sector; greater publicity on fisheries among the youth; increasing the visibility of women in the marine sector; and finally, recruiting women to positions of leadership.

The committee made several suggestions in line with the action plans. These include creating a dedicated internet site; appointing special 'ambassadors' to advocate gender equality in the marine sector; awarding incentives and prizes for outstanding achievements in marine fisheries, and sensitizing local leaders to gender equality issues. It recommended financial support for

female entrepreneurship in the sector, and preference for female applicants in the grant of aquaculture licences. It also advocated better entrepreneurial training opportunities in educational institutions and the induction of more women in decision-making roles.

The Action Plan suggested that the responsibility for achieving the proposed goals would rest with the Ministry of Fishery and Coastal Affairs, together with other public institutions and partners in the marine sector.

This Action Plan, is however, not Norway's first. In 1990, politically-active women took the initiative to create the first action plan for the marine sector. A Fishery Industry's Committee for Women was established and financed by the Ministry of Fisheries until the year 2000. Thereafter, the Fisheries Minister from the conservative party suggested that the task be transferred to another committee: The Committee of Competence for the Fishery Sector. In 2002, the same minister proposed that various partners in the marine sector could finance the committee and its work, a suggestion that was rejected by the marine sector. Since then, there has been no co-ordinating body. The 2007 Action Plan discusses the establishment of such a committee, but does not recommend it.

My experience with the sector, both as an outsider engaged in research and as an insider having personal connections with people in many coastal areas in North Norway, suggests that much has to be done by the community's women and men in order to reach these goals. While the initiative taken by the Minister of Fisheries is a positive first step, what about implementation? Will the Minister be able to pull along "crewmembers" from the Ministry and the different organizations? Would they be willing to put in resources?

The emphasis on professionalizing the industry as recommended in the Action Plan must also be called to question. Fisheries is a way of life and culture; the so-called professional fisheries activities cannot be viewed independently from the ways in which fishery households and communities are organized. Powerful interventions are needed at the household and community levels in order to combat male-dominated structures in the marine sector. The first step would necessarily involve a continuous dialogue with women in the sector whose needs and aspirations must determine the direction for fisheries in general.

This dialogue would necessarily involve women from the Fisherwomen's Association and other women's associations. However, to hear the voices of young unmarried women, who are seldom organized in the same way as the middle-aged and elderly women are, other organizing principles have to be developed. Perhaps focus group discussions in different

parts of the country could be held. Women's voices must be heard and their problems must be put on the political agenda.

Norway's Fisheries Minister, like many young women in the fisheries sector, is well-educated; she comes from a farming-fishing family, and, since she has expressed the wish to settle in her home village in Finnmark, perhaps she would be most suited to the task of arranging continuous dialogues among women in fisheries. The aim should be to develop better gender balance, and, in the long run, a more women-friendly fisheries policy! ❖

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Ancient food for future generations...

Sherry Pictou

This poem is dedicated to the struggles of clam fishers in Canada against the privatization of fishing areas

My heart is overflowing
with Grandma Sarah
teaching us to dig clams
and as she wraps all of our harvest
in foil over the heated coals
beneath the sand
I knew this was for me
and my lifetime...

And those life times
before and after me
where shell heaps
bare the answers to our existence
in both life and death...

The clam... the beautiful clam
hidden within its intergenerational
purple blue shell:
the food of life --
ancient food for future generations....

Oh my brother...
So contented as you walk slowly
the back roads....
With your bucket full of clams
and clam hack...

So serene and quiet
this walk of ancient paths
You carrying
so quietly
the ancestral knowledge
which the rest of us --
were too self absorbed
in the fast paced of tomorrow
thus not able to learn or feel
with our hearts, today....

I see you there
with your shucking knife
and for a second
trying to teach me....
As Your ancient laughter
of fathers and grandfathers
before you...

Ring loud to this day
in my heart of all hearts
as I struggled to learn
this art now floating along
bay shores and inlets...
and continue to do so...
Today....