

# Righting gender injustices

**Women workshop participants in South Africa stressed that fisheries policy should promote broader social and gender justice imperatives, benefiting all in the community**

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In the past, the role of women in fisheries policy and practice in South Africa was given little attention. Government fisheries officials, researchers and fisher activists did not of course deliberately exclude women; they merely saw little relevance for women in an industry that defines itself as predominantly male. More recently, the inclusion of general policy statements such as 'promoting race and gender equality' have served as catch-all phrases reflecting the apparent intent of the fisheries department to comply with the country's progressive anti-discrimination legislation. However, there are no further policy mechanisms or measures identified to make the commitment to gender equality a reality.



During the past year, a process for developing a new policy for the small-scale fisheries has been initiated. This process arose as a result of many years of struggle by men and women from traditional fishing communities who have been systematically excluded from the fishing rights regime introduced by the new democratic government in 2002 and consolidated in 2006. This approach is based on an individualistic, privatized notion of rights, in keeping with the government's neo-liberal approach to economic growth. This new paradigm has greatly undermined the traditional way of life and livelihood in local coastal communities. In

protest against their loss of livelihood, increasing poverty and food insecurity, these communities have fought hard to have their fishing rights and human rights recognized. Using the slogan "Fishing Rights = Human Rights" the fishers have made visible the link between basic human rights and the recognition of their fishing rights. The signing of an Equality Court order in May 2007, that compels the government fisheries department to begin a new policy process to "accommodate the socio-economic rights" of traditional fishers, has been hailed as a victory, and the process of developing a new policy is currently underway.

It was with the intention of highlighting the critical role that women should and do play in fisheries policy and practice that, in April 2008, a group of 35 women leaders from fishing and coastal communities in the Western and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa came together for the first ever 'women only' gathering from these communities. This 'Women in Fisheries' Workshop, facilitated by Masifundise Development Trust, aimed to provide an opportunity for women to engage with the current policy proposals for a small-scale fisheries policy in South Africa. While recognizing the importance of mainstreaming gender issues and ensuring that men and women work together to remove obstacles to gender inequality, the organizers felt strongly that, in this context, gender mainstreaming needs to go hand in hand with a strongly articulated vision from women fishers themselves, of their rights. The workshop aimed to equip women with the theoretical tools that would enable them to critically assess current proposals from a gender-based perspective. For many women, the notion of a 'gendered lens' was new; however, they found that it resonated with their practical, day-to-day experiences of the unequal power relations within their homes, communities, at work and in their dealings with the government fisheries department.

Prior to this workshop, men and women from fishing communities in South Africa had engaged in some debate about how women should benefit from the new policy but these debates had tended to end in polarized positions—women arguing that they should get equal rights and men arguing that 'a woman's place is in the home'. What precisely does 'equal rights' mean in a context where women do not necessarily want to also go to sea? What does

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it actually mean to say that a policy should be ‘gender just’ in the context of small-scale fisheries? Is a fishing policy the right place to insert a range of issues that relate to women’s social, economic and political position in their coastal communities? What is the relationship between a fisheries policy and broader social and economic development? These were some of the very challenging questions that the women grappled with in this workshop.

Through a process of systematically identifying the many roles that women fulfil in fishing communities and through stories about their grandmothers’ mothers’ and their own work in their fishing households and villages, the women gradually painted a rich and detailed picture of the work that women and girl children have done and continue to do. This process of storytelling revealed the social, economic, political and spiritual value of marine resources to women. Most significantly, it highlighted the particular values that women bring to fisheries: those of a nurturing, community-oriented and developmental perspective in which the links between all aspects of the fish supply chain are integrated. This approach of viewing the fisheries not merely from the narrow perspective of harvesting fish, but in terms of all the ways in which value can be added and benefits maximized for the community, helped

to expand the vision and objectives underlying the new policy.

Linked to this community approach was a strong emphasis on the need to ensure that the new policy provided social security, not currently available for the small-scale fisheries. This issue was close to the hearts of many women as they shared with each other the impact of the loss of loved ones, often breadwinners, at sea. The women were also adamant that they should participate equally in the institutional structures set up to manage the fisheries and went as far as demanding 50 per cent of all seats on local co-management structures. They viewed this as a strategy for ensuring that the developmental focus of the policy is implemented. At the end of the workshop, the women ensured that the draft policy statement developed by fishing communities was prefaced with a strong statement on the need for the government to recognize the role that women play. The women developed a plan of action for taking the outcomes of the workshop forward. Central to the plan was the importance of mobilizing women to fight for their rights and of networking with women from other countries who are fighting similar struggles to ensure that fisheries policy promotes broader social and gender justice imperatives. ❏