

No women, no sustainable fisheries

To ignore the role of women in fisheries is to brush aside their potential to strengthen the sector

Oh, lady, how sad my life is, nowadays I can hardly afford to eat...

In the fishing town of El Bellote, this is how they begin telling the life story of Rosa, mother of 11 children. El Bellote is situated on the edge of the Mecoacan Lagoon, in the humid tropics of Tabasco State in Mexico. The main fishery is for oysters, which, along with other species caught in the coastal strip, used to be sufficient to provide the basic food and subsistence needs of the local population.

But, since the arrival of 'development', things have changed. During the decade of the 1960s, Mexico entered the era of the petroleum boom the 'black gold' became the force driving national development. The daily export of oil from Puerto de Dos Bocas in Tabasco was 437,000 barrels.

The construction of infrastructure transformed the environment, damaging marine fauna and flora. There were frequent oil spillages and accidents, which caused fishery production to fall. In 1992, a crisis occurred in Mecoacan, when oyster mortality reached 70 to 80 per cent of the total production. This is but one example repeated with different actors but with similar consequences, along the entire coastline of our country.

The environmental impact on the quantity and quality of artisanal fish catches in Mexico has become a central problem for coastal dwellers. To this phenomenon has been added a fierce competition for resources, due to the increase, in the number of producers and the proliferation of small boats. Thus, pollution and overexploitation are the two principal causes of the fall in income of coastal fishermen. The deterioration in the quality of life of families dependent

on fishing for their livelihoods has affected the entire community and is changing relationships between men and women. Women have developed multiple survival strategies to compensate for the fall in production.

Women increasingly go fishing with their husbands, brothers or fathers, an active role, which was previously almost exclusively a man's. More women are also working as traders, filleters in salting and drying, in packing and de-shelling.

Nowadays, it is common for women to enter the job market as cooks, workers in fish and shellfish restaurants, as housemaids or in small enterprises. Others have entered the 'non-formal economy', as street or door-to-door saleswomen, doing stitching and maquila (assembly work).

Women's contribution to household income in cash or kind has not diminished their traditional roles. Looking after the children, cleaning the house, cooking and other domestic duties are now supplemented by other work. This is not very different from the fate of women in other sectors who perform a double role. Work commitments of Third World women have become so great as to force them to 'work round the clock'.

Household routine

However, in the case of fishing, there are some differences. For example, the routine and hours of catching fish determine the daily pattern of household activities. Many fishermen leave for fishing at night. If their wives work during the day, there is little or no opportunity for family life.

Another issue is that fish is highly perishable and fisherfolk have few places for storage, and also lack facilities to

preserve the quality of their products. Unless the fish is sold immediately, they lose the opportunity to get the best prices from the middlemen waiting on the beach.

Thus, it is common that women are found selling fish in the community or in the regional markets, immediately after the men have landed. These jobs oblige the women to leave their children alone, or put their eldest daughters-often still girls-in charge of the household. The consequences are not only economic and physical, but also emotional and psychological.

There are also other factors intrinsically associated with the environment, which have repercussions on the quality of life in coastal communities, particularly for women. For example, some health problems have got worse. It is common for the so-called poverty-related diseases like stomach and respiratory infections, cholera, malnutrition, etc. to be found more in communities with environmental problems, such as pollution of water bodies, lack of health services and atmospheric pollution (especially in areas of petroleum industries).

New diseases are evidently appearing. For example, a medical study in the Tabasco region found an increase in leukaemia. In the northern border area, babies are born with anencephalia, possibly associated with the presence of toxic

substances. The lack of research linking health with environmental problems makes it difficult to decidedly establish the causes of such diseases. But these growing health problems affect women more, as they are the ones traditionally responsible for the sick.

Once communities 'enter the market' women also find less access to the sustainable use of natural resources. They also lose options to produce food in family gardens or to raise domestic animals. So too in many other aspects which, in the end, result in a deteriorating standard of living for coastal families. All of these issues have hardly been considered in the debate on environmental problems, which ignores the impact on different sectors of the population.

Evidently, there is a need to design policies, which address and alleviate the situation. In Mexico, as in many other countries, coastal fisheries are low on the list of government priorities, despite being an important source of food for many people and low-cost protein for those with scarce resources.

Traditionally subordinate

This marginalization is far worse for women, due to the traditionally subordinate role that society bestows on them. Even traditional fishermen's organization like co-operatives, unions and other organized groups, do not provide space or a voice for women.

Apart from an in-depth analysis of the situation of women in fishing communities, what is more important is to promote them as social actors with the potential to improve their family situation, their communities, the fishery and their country. It will be difficult to have sustainable fisheries without the participation of women. **3**

This piece is by Hilda Salazar Ramirez, on environmental activist who works with the fishermen's union in Mexico