

Looking Back, Looking Forward

A learning circle meeting in Canada discussed issues and options for women in the Canadian small-scale fisheries

By the **Coastal Learning Communities Network** that unites communities on Canada's Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific coasts, and advocates for the adoption of indigenous stewardship models for natural resource management

On 30 March 2010, eight women from the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Canada gathered in a learning circle to discuss the role of women in Canadian fisheries. The group consisted of both indigenous and non-indigenous women, each with organizational or research experience in the fisheries. Although separated by hundreds and thousands of kilometres, the women dialled into a toll-free telephone number and formed a figurative circle in which after a speaker finished, she passed a feather to the next person, to acknowledge her turn to speak.

The session started with a prayer:

Let us look to the four directions and give thanks in all those directions. Let us give thanks to the four elements and to the landscapes, the mountains, and the rivers, and to all of the rocks, those grandfather rocks. And let us give thanks to the wind and the power and the skies and the stars. And let us think about all the plant people who came before us ... all of the four-legged, the winged, and the finned. And to give thanks to all of our ancestors, to all the people on the earth...to all the lives, the lessons that they've learned and passed on so that we could be here together today. And to

give thanks to all of our family and friends who also made it so that we could be here together. And to give thanks to each other for making the time today to be together so that we can be in this circle and that we can hear good things and speak good things and feel good things today.

Women's work and the challenges women face in the fisheries in Canada was the first topic of discussion. Everyone agreed that women are able to look beyond fishing and think in terms of the welfare and stability of the community, food security, and the wellbeing of the family and children. However, a pressing issue is the loss of commercial licences that indigenous and non-indigenous people have suffered on account of the privatization of fishery resources. For example, on Vancouver Island on the Pacific Coast, community- and family-based shell fisheries, and, in particular, the clam fishery, have for long sustained the indigenous people. Men, women, children and elders work together. Women's work—gathering, drying, processing, and trading shellfish—is particularly intensive. Without commercial licences, however, women find that they can no longer legally sell the catch. As a result, their way of life is under threat.

The fishing people on the Atlantic Coast face similar problems. In 1999, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision—the Marshall Decision—gave indigenous people the right to participate in the commercial fishery. However, this right is being diluted in the prevailing context of a market-driven fishery. Another Supreme Court ruling—the Sparrow Decision—confirmed the right of all indigenous people to engage in fishing for food and traditional purposes but disallowed the sale of traditionally-harvested fishery products. Fishing offers only limited benefits to the local indigenous economy, and the decline in catch may be related to the declining health of the people.

As a result of these problems, women are under stress. If their husbands have a licence, women must join the fishing trip because hiring crew is expensive. This adds to women's normal household tasks and fishery-related duties, such as bookkeeping. Some communities have no young women left since they have all left in search of work. One consequence of the mounting stress is an increase in domestic violence. Women, it was felt, must have access to

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safe spaces where they can discuss the challenges they face.

Throughout the discussion, there were repeated references to the loss of licences due to privatization, a process that makes access to the fisheries market-driven and highly expensive. This loss of access is associated with privatized landing sites, wharves and clam beaches as well, one of many changes due to policies of globalization that privilege profits above social wellbeing.

The role of women in decisionmaking came up next on the agenda. It was felt that women have less of a voice in the fisheries today than they did even in the not-so-distant past. Ten years ago, there was greater openness to the idea of women's participation in fishing organizations. Women were forming their own organizations as well. Today, however, the situation is very different. It was suggested that since fishermen are experiencing a loss of control in the small-scale fisheries, they are unwilling to share what little organizational power they retain. At the level of the family, however, women continue to be consulted by their husbands. Thus, women may have a voice in the household but none at the organizational level, a trend visible in both indigenous and non-indigenous fishing communities. The situation poses a serious challenge for the political mobilization of women.

Another threat to the small-scale fisheries comes from industrial aquaculture. This export-

oriented industry is displacing traditional fishers, and, as fishing policies are aligned closely to global markets, threatening their food security as well. The industrialization of the fisheries makes it difficult for communities to adapt the small-scale fisheries to meet the additional challenge posed by climate change. Local and traditional knowledge is discounted in fisheries management; there is greater use of intensive harvesting methods, and more pollution is being generated—all these factors make adaptation difficult.

Although the prospects for the sector look grim and there is a sense of despair, the participants all felt the need to continue holding such learning circles in order to come up with alternative strategies to revitalize women's participation in the contemporary context of the fisheries.

The learning circle concluded with the following prayer:

Let us give thanks for participating in this learning circle today. Although there are lots of challenges and lots of things that make us feel downhearted, I do still think that there is hope and like someone said earlier, "there is still time." And I don't quite understand it but I think there is strength when women come together and try to make changes for the better and for the future. And I think that is tied to our responsibility for future generations. So I am very thankful to have been part of this. ❏