

Beyond the veil

A skewed model or image of community makes gender a non-issue in fisheries management

For current fisheries management systems and practices, women's concerns, interests and contributions are typically considered unimportant. It is not simply a matter of neglect but rather an issue of perceived irrelevance. This is an observation that fisheries social scientists share, and I believe it to be fairly accurate, in Norway and elsewhere.

One may wonder why this is so. Why are women's issues, interests and knowledge disregarded when governments design fisheries management systems? This is the question addressed in this article.

One reason, advanced in Norway by Siri Gerrard, is that women are conspicuously absent in management agencies. Thus, women in fisheries communities have few insiders who speak on their behalf when management decisions are made. Also, women in fisheries communities have been generally less effective than men as an outside political force, due to poorer organizational resources than their male counterparts. Another likely cause is the simple fact that the fishers targeted by management policies are predominantly men. In Norway, for instance, women constitute only two per cent of the registered fishing workforce. As a consequence, men's concerns in fisheries management are viewed as primary. Therefore, one may expect that more women in managing positions in government agencies would not make much of a difference as they would still be aimed at men as targets.

I do not intend to criticize these explanations. I believe they are part of the overall picture. My point is that there are additional and more subtle factors at play here. I suggest that women's issues are perceived as irrelevant by fisheries

managers for some of the same reasons that they regard social science to be irrelevant. Moreover, I argue that women's contributions and concerns are neglected because community and household are not part of the management equation. Typically, fisheries management is a relationship between a government and a rights holder, who, in most cases, is not a community or a household but an individual. I claim that fisheries management systems, as they are presently constructed in Norway and other North Atlantic countries, reflect a certain image of community that has the effect of veiling women's concerns and positive contributions to fisheries management.

Community is a missing link in fisheries management, as it also is in Garrett Hardin's model of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' that is at the root of prevailing management practices. But they both hold an implicit theory of community. Fishers are perceived as competitors in the fisheries commons, their social relations are overall "positional", as Fred Hirsch described relationships within zero-sum games. To use an example by Jean Paul Sartre, as in a bus queue, the people lined up may not have any other relation to each other than being at a particular place at a particular time, all with the same goal in mind, that is to get on the bus first and find a good seat. From the perspective of the individual, other passengers are nothing more than a nuisance. They are merely in the way.

Methodological individualism

Obviously, harvesters on the fishing ground can be seen in this way, likewise communities, especially if one adopts the perspectives of methodological individualism and rational choice that underpin the Garrett Hardin argument.

A different image regards community as a system of symbiotic relationships, where fishers and community members are mutually dependent and supportive, and where individuals regard each other as a group.

In the social science literature, local communities are frequently described as *gemeinschaft*, learning systems, moral communities, employment systems, or networks, all hinting at the integrative social qualities of communities. In this vision, communities are more than simply aggregates of individuals driven by self-centred utilitarian motives, as the former model takes for granted. Rather, communities are well connected systems rooted in kinship, culture and history.

To clarify further this point, one can fruitfully make use of the French sociologist Raymond Boudon's distinction between "functional" and "interdependent" systems. By the first category he means systems of interaction where the actors involved assume positions or roles within a scheme of division of labour. Thus, functional systems require a minimum of organization. A firm and a household are typical examples. Interdependent systems, on the other hand, are "those systems of interaction where individual actions can be analyzed without reference to the category of a role."

In interdependent systems, there are no predefined rights and obligations that relate actors to each other and prescribe their behaviour. Nevertheless, actors affect each other with their individual behaviour, and they typically produce collective phenomena which they do not foresee or want. The bus-queue example used above illustrates the basic traits of an interdependent system. The 'Tragedy of the Commons', as it is explained by Garrett Hardin, is another good illustration.

A fisheries management system based on the premise that fisheries communities are, by essence, interdependent, as Boudon defines it, risks dissipating the social capital that is invested in the community. It neglects what collective action, institutions and organizations can do to build communities. The interdependent systems model leads to few reservations regarding a fisheries management system aimed at downscaling the fishery. The fewer the bus passengers, the more comfortable the ride (but perhaps not so interesting?).

Interdependent model

Furthermore—and in this context, this is the main point—the interdependent systems model of the community totally overlooks women's roles and contributions in the fisheries community employment system and civil society. Since fisheries management

predominantly, but implicitly, rests on the interdependent systems model and not the functional model of the community, this effect is, of course, unfortunate but predictable. This model also leaves the scholarly contributions of fisheries sociologists and anthropologists outside the knowledge base on which managers draw, because these researchers are more inspired by the functional than the interdependent system model.

There is no need to go into a detailed description and discussion of women's efforts in fisheries. They are well documented in the social science literature. Donna Davis and Jane Nadel Klein's book, *To Work and to Weep*, is one reference. In Norway, Siri Gerrard's pioneering work on women's role as ground crew in the small-scale fishing enterprise stands out. The research programme Women in Fisheries Districts, initiated by the Norwegian Fisheries Research Council, further filled some of the gaps in existing knowledge. It is now well established that women provide a whole range of services that are key to the viability of the fishing household as well as the fishing enterprise of their spouses. This, of course, is a phenomenon that is not unique to Norwegian fisheries.

Liv Torill Pettersen's thesis on the economic contribution of women as a buffer in times of crisis, must also be mentioned. Likewise, Viggo Rossvær's recent book on Srvær, a crisis-ridden fishing community in Finnmark. Here, it is women's efforts, partly channelled through their local association Helselaget that keep the community together and maintain the spirit and life's meaning during times of crisis. In other words, women's contributions are not restricted to the household and their husbands' fishing enterprise. They also take on a responsibility for the whole community, also as community spokespersons *vis-à-vis* the society at large. Again, this is not unique to women in Norwegian fisheries communities.

The irony is that these contributions are mostly disregarded by fisheries managers who have their eyes fixed on the fish and the fishermen. Had they adopted the functional system model of fishing communities rather than the

interdependent model, they could not have avoided noting that fishing enterprises could only work within the larger context of the community, in which women play crucial roles. Then, they would have had to also recognize that women are stakeholders in fisheries management and that they also could legitimately claim to be holders of resource rights, a status which current management systems do not grant them, in fisheries less so than in other primary industries.

In a recently published article, I argue that not only are healthy fish stocks necessary for healthy communities, but that the reverse also holds true. Overfishing is not always a result of market failure, as the interdependent system model would have it, but a community failure. This is the community that fails to install self-restraint, high normative standards, social solidarity and cohesion among community members, and not least among the young fisher recruits.

Hence, a community which finds itself in a state of anomie, that has disintegrated socially and morally, has lost its ability to formally or informally sanction irregular fishing behaviour. This is perhaps the most serious crisis a fishing community may encounter.

Norwegian newspapers have recently reported that quotas are deliberately being exceeded, rules are ignored, and that a culture of cheating is spreading within the fishing industry, at the expense of the resource. I argue that this is what to be expected of a fisheries management system that have no appreciation of community as a functional system, where the roles and contributions of men and women are equally important, for the material as well as moral well-being of communities.

More than mere rules

What then is the answer to the shortcomings of fisheries management? Since healthy communities are vital to maintaining healthy fish stocks, fisheries management must consist of more than just rules and regulations that curb fishing effort. The community must be part of the fisheries management tool-box. Management must then also aim at

building communities. It must reinforce those conditions and processes that make geographical communities into communities in the sociological sense.

Resource rights should therefore be vested in communities; they should not be the privilege of individual fishermen. Then also the civic institutions of the coastal community, in which women have always played a crucial role, could not be defined as outside the fisheries management realm.

In other words, a more holistic management, community-centred approach is needed, an approach that recognizes women's contribution to communities' viability and hence stock conservation.

Only when the functional systems model of the community is adopted, would women's contributions to stock preservation become focused. Only then would the relevance of supporting women's work roles, associations and community initiatives be seen as relevant for fisheries management.

This is also why more women in management positions or more women on fishing vessels would not automatically change current management practice.

As long as the interdependent system model prevails as the dominant image of

community, gender will continue to be a non-issue in fisheries management, regardless of staff composition of management agencies and fishing enterprises.

This paper, by Svein Jentoft of the Institute of Planning and Community Studies at the University of Tromsø, Finland, was presented at the Women's World Conference, Tromsø, on 24 June 1999