

FROM NORTH AMERICA/Canada

Coming together

by Chantal Abord-Hugon, co-ordinator, Oxfam Canada/Projet Acadie, and supporter, New Brunswick Coastal Women

Women in the fisheries sector are, for the most part, involved in fish processing. They are seasonal workers working between 10 to 20 weeks a year, depending on the species. In the past, the government's "unemployment insurance" programme did provide an income for the rest of the year, filling the gap when the fishing season and the fish plants were closed. Many people received more than half of their annual income from this government aid programme. (This is perhaps why until today fish plant workers seem less concerned with the decline of the fisheries resource than with the shrinking of the government aid programme).

In 1994, the government engaged in a programme of social reform, listing criteria to qualify for what came to be called "employment insurance". These criteria made it more difficult to access government aid, reducing benefits and reducing the period during which people could benefit, leaving most workers with a gap ranging between a few weeks to a few months when benefits ran out and work had still not started and they were left with no income at all.

When the changes were first announced, a huge protest movement developed, with demonstrations, public meetings, etc. in which women were most often the leaders. During the two years that followed, there was a big mobilization motivated by the fear of losing income security, of losing homes and not being able to feed families. A group of women from coastal communities started organizing conferences for women, to break their isolation and to keep themselves informed on subjects identified as critical, such as the changes to employment insurance, potential for employment and stress management.

Status of Women Canada, a government agency, offered funding. This helped organize more conferences to bring women together. In 1998, funding was provided for an action-research programme to assess the status of women in coastal communities and to see how the social programme reforms had affected their

social and economic situation. The results were to be used by women to help influence decision-makers and to bring about changes to government programmes.

Research was conducted by three women from within coastal communities who met with other women on an individual basis. They did an impressive job and a detailed report was prepared. Since the fall of 1998, we have been going back to the women with these results, which clearly show the negative impact of changes to employment insurance and also highlight the need for better training. However, while there are tools to engage in action, and a few leaders have developed skills and are eager to work toward social change, an important demobilization of the majority of women is being faced. What is heard most often is: "Women are afraid"; "Women have adjusted"; "There is a feeling of resignation"; "People do not believe they can influence the government"; and so on.

Among the women leaders in the communities and their supporters, there is much reflection on what is going wrong and on how women can be brought together again. Four years ago, there were spontaneous protests against the reform of social programmes. We seemed to have the potential for a social movement aimed at social change but fear that we are losing it now. Why ?

This summer, in Ghana during a training programme on fisheries, social analysis and organizational strategies, we discussed the subject of movements, how they are born and sustained. Using the analysis developed there, we can perhaps try and understand why the momentum is not being sustained as well as it could. As we discussed there, to sustain a movement, the following are important criteria:

- The process moves step by step/issue to issue: we have not moved from the issue of employment insurance.
- Purpose and objective are sharpened: this has not been achieved.
- The base is expanded through education: this has not been achieved because of lack of funding or lack of committed volunteers to engage in education.

- Facts are researched, studied and documented; policy makers are lobbied and alternatives are proposed: we received government funding for a research-action project which was to be used to influence decision-makers. Though it was necessary, it should have been done before or at least at the same time as education. Here we see that our agenda was set by the type of funding available; it made us maybe move too fast and not address the basic need of women which was simply to meet once in a while to break out of their isolation. They have now a tool—the action-research report—but no political awareness or the will to use it to engage in more political actions.

- Links are built with supportive allies: this is being done by joining a coalition of women's organizations. It is very important that the specific situation of women seasonal workers from the coastal communities be brought to the attention of women's groups which are generally more aware of the issues of middle-class working women. For example, their main focus is job equality whereas for seasonal workers the issue is simply "having a job".

- Members are kept involved: this has been a weakness but we have to find means to get women interested enough to remain involved. There is a need to understand why there is a loss of interest in being involved.

- People speak for themselves, develop diverse leadership.

- Structures are developed—useful to guide and stabilize the movement, but caution is required since structures can also kill it: this is a big question - here in New Brunswick, no formal structure was developed to organize women in coastal communities. There were just a few advisory committees in three different regions working more or less as a collective and on an ad hoc basis. Would a more formal structure have helped sustain a movement? Or harm it more?

We are now at a stage of much questioning! But we see achievements and try to learn from mistakes. In February 1999, more than 25 women have shown interest in participating not only at the annual convention of the Maritime Fishermen's Union, but also in preparatory meetings, for which 10 women will be

selected to attend. They will be bringing to the fore not only women's issues and concerns but also the concerns of their families and communities for the survival of a healthy fisheries to sustain healthy coastal communities.