

# Women in fisheries in Africa

**The diverse and productive fisheries in Africa's coastal countries depend greatly on the contributions of women, who are today increasingly asserting their right to livelihood and support**

By **Serge Raemaekers** (serge.raemaekers@gmail.com) Member, ICSF, and **Jackie Sunde** (jsunde@telkomsa.net), Member, ICSF

The 30,490 km of coastline around the African continent is home to many small-scale traditional fishing communities who depend on these shores for their livelihoods. In addition, the continent hosts vast lakes which provide critical sources of food and livelihoods for many inland communities. It is estimated that there are approximately ten million people in Africa reliant on small-scale fisheries as their primary livelihood, and a further 90 million depend on fishing as part of a diversified livelihood strategy. As few countries disaggregate their statistics along gender lines, it is not known how many of these fishers are women; however, it is generally acknowledged that women play a very significant role in fisheries on the continent, depending on them for food and for their livelihoods.

The coastal regions around the continent include very diverse marine and aquatic ecosystems, resulting in considerable differences between small-scale fishing communities in different parts of the continent. The particular species caught and landed in different areas, shapes the type of fisheries that has developed in that region and this in turn has contributed towards

shaping women's involvement in the fishery. In some parts of West Africa the fisheries are dominated by small pelagic catches such as sardines and herrings, and it is mostly men who go to sea whilst women are active in pre- and post-harvest activities. In parts of the Eastern Indian Ocean, large pelagic species like tuna are caught. In some regions, crustaceans such as crabs, lobsters, shrimps and prawn are an important component of the catch, and women participate actively in the fishing of these species as well as in pre- and post-harvest activities. In many countries, women play an important role in the harvesting of inter-tidal resources such as mussels, oysters, conches, octopus and seaweed.

The fisheries of West Africa in countries such as Senegal, Cote'Ivoire, Benin, Sierra Leone, Guinea Conakry, Ghana and Mauritania have received considerable focus in the past two decades with non-governmental organizations as well as donor interest focused on this region. This is due to the important role it has played in inter-regional trade and in trade with the European Union. Several specific regional workshops have highlighted the conditions that women face in small-scale fisheries and their need for access to credit, infrastructure and better work conditions, particularly for those who are involved in pre- and post-harvest activities, including the processing of fish and inter-regional trade. In addition, workshops in countries surrounding Lake Victoria such as Uganda, Zambia and Tanzania have focused attention on inland fisheries, and the impact of the development of trade in this region and its associated ecological, social and economic impacts, including those on women in fishing communities. In this region, the issue of 'sex for fish' has caught the attention of policy makers and researchers who have highlighted the negative consequences of the fish trade on power relations at the local level. Kenya and Tanzanian fisheries have also had a lot of focus from conservation organizations resulting in considerable literature on these fisheries. In more recent years, small-scale fishers in South Africa have garnered attention through their advocacy activities and demanded that a human rights based approach to fisheries must include a focus on their rights as women.

BEATRICE GOREZ / CFFA



Women fishsmokers in Guinea Konakry. There is a need to support women in these countries and in enabling them to link up with women fishworkers in other countries

Despite the relatively good coverage of women's activities in African fisheries in Yemaya over the years, the roles of women in several countries remain largely invisible, and women in these countries remain largely outside of the nascent networks of small-scale fisheries activists. The challenge of language across Africa makes this difficult. Two countries in Southern Africa where women in fisheries seldom receive attention are Namibia and Angola along the southwestern shores of the continent.

Fishing and related activities are a key livelihood strategy for Angolan coastal communities. Both men and women own boats and employ crew to catch fish. Women are mostly involved in post-harvest activities, including buying fish from the boats when they come into shore, cleaning and processing fish, as well as the sale of fresh, salted and cooked fish. Often wives have preferential access to their husband's catch. They sell it to local or regional traders in what appears to be an intricate network of local benefit-sharing arrangements. Dried fish sells for similar prices as fresh fish, even though the process of salting and drying takes up to eight days and is considered labour intensive. Some women cooperatives have access to dedicated centres for salting and drying, but most often fish processing and marketing takes place along the main roads. Some women have also diversified into making yoghurt, ice cream, popcorn and cakes to sell at the fish market. However, they often argue that this is difficult to sell when the fishers themselves make little money from catches. In more remote coastal villages, women who buy directly from the artisanal fishers have to travel to larger cities to sell their catch, making them particularly vulnerable. In order to reduce risks of abuse

or robbery, they travel in small groups of women traders.

Along the Namibian coastline women collect shells for making jewellery called 'onyoka'. Onyoka, a traditional necklace made from mussel shells, is common jewellery among the Oshiwambo speaking people. The use of seashells to make this jewellery has created a means to generate income for a number of women, who have moved to the coastal towns wholly to do this business. Most women operate individually, but on several occasions, when they are going far from their homes, they also operate in groups. Their operations involve collecting shells from the shoreline, processing these at their homes, and travelling to the northern regions of Namibia where the product is mainly sold. Women shell collectors often argue that they are keeping alive the culture and tradition of the Oshiwambo speaking groups. Although they have a dependence on harvesting marine resources along the Namibian coastline, they are not recognized by law, and hence operate informally. Their strong social, cultural, historical and traditional links to the sea, coupled with their limited capital make them a particularly vulnerable group. This group's vulnerability is exacerbated by dynamics and trends within their immediate environment—such as ocean acidification, increased sea tides and waves, competition with other jewellery makers, limited processing equipment and gear, and lack of access to educational and transport infrastructure—as well as an inability to belong to any formal institution.

There is a need to support women in these countries in making their fisheries visible and in enabling them to link up with women fishworkers and activists in other countries. ❏