
FROM AFRICA/ Gambia**Educating Ms. Fish Cutter****An experiment in Ghanatown catches up on women's education****by Eva Munk-Madsen, a Copenhagen-based consultant on fisheries and women's issues**

In Gambia, women of all ages come together after finishing their household chores, in the late evening. They are here to learn English. Few of them got much school education in their childhood. They work hard every day at the beach, where they cut sharks and skates, the catch of their husbands, brothers, sons or other fellow villagers. There they salt and spread the meat on drying racks for sun-drying. Some of them are wage workers, while others are able to buy the catch and export the final processed product themselves. All of them aim at keeping their children in school and most of them succeed. At the same time, they are eager to improve their own abilities and to learn English.

In Ghanatown, a Ghanaian immigrant fishing village in the Gambia, an evening school was started this year in August. It was open to women and men who had never learned to speak English. As an outsider in the village, attempting to open an export-promotion house for by-products from the traditional fishery, I soon learned that communication in English was only possible with men, as they generally have received more school education than women. This restraint on building direct business relations with the women, together with my Danish background, made me propose the organization of evening classes in Ghanatown. In Denmark, adult education through evening classes, at low cost, is very widespread and popular.

The proposal was received with enthusiasm. The idea was presented to the council of village elders, to church leaders, in churches, and to the women's leaders, and soon the community mobilized its own internal resources. Several educated villagers had earlier organized classes for women in both English and Fanti, but the migratory character of the fishing business had always put an end to these initiatives. Now a school board has been set up with members who hold important positions in the community. This includes: the headmaster of the primary school, the Imam, a church leader, a member of the elders council, a teacher with

experience in adult education, two young innovative fish traders, two women students and me. The women rarely show up at board meetings, as they are busy with household chores when it is quiet at the beach.

I had the pleasure of teaching the first two conversation classes in English for about 15 dedicated women and 14 dedicated men. Under the light of a few petrol lamps and sometimes with strong competition from the noise of the rain falling on the tin roof, the students learned to present themselves and their occupations. "I am a fish cutter", said most women, and "I am a fisherman", said most men. On my departure, several teachers were ready to take over on a voluntary basis. For the rest of the year, the evening classes will be given free of charge. The teachers work for free. The school board has applied for some financial support to get lights in the school building and wages for the teachers from next year. A school fee will also be introduced, but it is the intention to keep it low.

The success of this initiative relies upon its acceptance, not only by the women students, but also by their husbands. The male students are, whether married or not, in a different position to make decisions on their own. The support of younger and/or educated men in the community is here of utmost importance. Blessed be the school board for their dedication to the task and their visions for a better future.