

Networking for Strength

A newly established network of women fish processors and traders promises to improve the prospects of women in Africa's post-harvest sector

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The vast fish resources of the African continent offer many benefits. Fishery and aquaculture products supply food, nutrition, income and livelihoods to hundreds of millions of people; they help earn foreign currency and represent conservation and biodiversity values of global significance.

Despite its vast marine, freshwater and aquaculture assets, the African continent continues to be saddled with numerous problems that challenge long term resource and environmental sustainability, and impede the sector's contribution to food security, poverty alleviation and national economic growth.

Recent statistics reveal that women make up more than one-fourth (27 per cent) of the workforce in the African fisheries and aquaculture sector. The great majority of these women are employed in post-harvest (91.5 per cent) making a significant contribution to food security, livelihoods and household incomes. However, although gender has been on the international development agenda for a long time, many inequalities remain and the role of women in fishery and aquaculture is often not given the attention it deserves. Women remain marginalised within the sector, both in terms of their fishing related activities and their role in decision making processes.

Cognizant of the above challenges, the African Union developed a Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and

Aquaculture in Africa (PFRS), which was adopted by the 23rd summit of African Heads of States and Governments in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in June 2014. One of the seven policy objectives of this Pan African strategic document is to guarantee, and sustainably strengthen, the contribution of artisanal fisheries to poverty alleviation, food and nutritional security and socio-economic benefits of fishing communities, specifically the fisherwomen, in Africa.

Two years ago, in 2016, the African Union-Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) organised a training workshop aimed at strengthening the capacity of women fish processors and traders associations on a range of issues, including: effective implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards; quality standards; the safe handling of fish and fisheries products for increased product shelf life; as well as access to markets and socio-economic benefits. The workshop led to a number of significant recommendations including the need to establish a continental network of associations of women fish processors and traders.

By April 2017, the dream of forming a network for African women in fisheries was realised in a consultative workshop organised by AU-IBAR in collaboration with the NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA), World Fish and the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This consultative workshop brought together 55 participants from 28 African Union Member states, including Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Cote D'ivoire, D.R. Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda

AU-IBAR



AWFISHNET members with the leaders of Tanzanian fisheries division and AU-IBAR after launching the network in April 2017 at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This consultative workshop brought together 55 participants from 28 African Union Member states

The main objective of the network is to provide a continental platform for women fish processors and traders

and Zambia. Also taking part in the workshop were regional institutions such as the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization (LVFO), the Regional Commission of Fisheries of Gulf of Guinea (COREP) and the African Network of Women in Fisheries (RAFEP/COMHAFAT), as well as experts from environmental agencies, information dissemination agencies, donor groups and the AU-IBAR. This initiative gave birth to the African Network for Women Fish Processors and Traders (AWFISHNET). The official representatives of the new forum were elected with due consideration to regional representation and language, and an action plan was developed to guide the network's activities for the next two years. It was agreed that, pending further decision, Tanzania—the country elected as the secretariat—would house the network.

AWFISHNET members recommended that the continental network would function more efficiently if representation from each Member State came from associations belonging to recognised national women's networks. It was therefore suggested that each country establish a national women's network if it did not already have one, and further, that the capacity of these national women's associations and networks be duly strengthened. It was suggested that certain focal persons or associations be made responsible for aiding the formation of national networks and for mapping out the women's associations in fish processing and trade in their respective countries. The participating country representatives were also advised to send feedback to their fisheries line ministries.

The AWFISHNET network now uses a Facebook page and WhatsApp to communicate,

and to share indigenous and technical knowledge in fisheries and development as well as business experiences.

The main objective of the network is to provide a continental platform for women fish processors and traders to achieve a range of goals. These include: collaboration and cooperation among women fish processor and trader associations across the continent; sharing of best practices, experiences, technologies and learning; effective advocacy on issues affecting women's fish processor and trader associations, including, in particular, the establishment of an enabling policy environment; building and strengthening capacities of members to effectively implement continental policies at local, national, regional and continental levels; strengthening the role and participation of fish processor and trader enterprises owned by women as Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the fisheries sector, with the objective of improving access to markets, expanding markets and marketing opportunities, thereby fostering the equitable participation of women fish processor and trader enterprises in intra-regional African fish trade.

AWFISHNET's dream of empowering women, improving access to markets; expanding markets and marketing opportunities and fostering the equitable participation of post-harvest enterprises in intra-regional African fish trade is not yet close to reality. Support is needed to strengthen the capacities of its secretariat and member groups as well as to encourage the formation of national women's networks where they do not exist. AWFISHNET sends out a call for support to recognise, utilise and enhance women's potentials and capabilities in the fisheries sector for sustainable and equitable development. ❏