



AFRICA

MAKING EACH AND EVERY AFRICAN FISHER COUNT: WOMEN DO FISH

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Abstract

For many officials working in development, documenting issues of particular concern to women is nothing new. These officials believe that these issues reflect women's demands for equality as well as the influence of feminist ideas on the tradition and culture of Africa. Additionally, these officials believe that a fisheries project should benefit all fishers, not just a few fishers while others lag behind or become even more disadvantaged as a result.

In Nigeria's southern maritime rural communities, as well as in some central inland communities, experienced fisheries and development officials are familiar with the many stories of development interventions which have benefited more male fishers compared to female fishers since the nation's independence in October 1960. The nation's efforts to eradicate poverty in rural communities have so far not benefited every poor family, more so the fishing families. These trends are, however, changing as most development workers are increasingly committed to addressing this inequality of impacts in poverty alleviation projects.

This paper documents women's contributions to the changing economy of the fishing communities in East and West Africa from the past to the present. It also reflects the efforts and contributions of the scientists and practitioners who have participated in various ways at different stages of the study.

Men and their Rivers

Man originated from the substance we call water.
And in each passing hour of his life he depends upon it for his very survival

From Exploring Wilderness Waterways by Buddy Mays Chronicle Books/San Francisco, 1977.

According to Mays (1977), water has been the driving force behind generations of men who since the seventeenth century have explored and inhabited lands long thought useless. Wildwaters is also described by Mays in terms of water travel, which man finds exciting for sport and/or refuge in their 'most virgin' form. Man inhabited these lands that were perceived to be wild and useless. These wild and useless lands are still in existence in many parts of the developing world where men, women and children are living, working and reproducing. These natural rural ecosystems are challenging for human habitation and they lack the infrastructure to enable the inhabitants to pursue a more progressive development. The human families that live here, however, have come to depend heavily on harvests from the aquatic ecosystems for their livelihood.

These foundational ideas of 'men and their rivers' have contributed, in part, to a number of gendered generalizations and sweeping conclusions about the fisheries sector. These include:

- That the world over, but especially in developing countries, fishing is by tradition a male occupation; That fishing is is too strenuous an activity for women, that the participation of women in fishing in particular is usually limited to processing the catch and attending to its distribution, and in some developing countries, that women completely dominate these functions.

- that men take over the responsibilities for women's work as soon as these subsistence activities become mechanized or when these activities are transformed from subsistence into market production.

The Objectives for this Study

There is a need to tell the other side of the story of the wilderness and the waterways - from a gender perspective. Numerous publications on the livelihoods of men emphasise their role as the primary, if not sole harvesters of the wildwaters and very little attention is paid to the activities of women and children who are 'active participants in Man's quest for survival'. Moreover, as a follow-up to the adventures of Mays (1977) and others, we need to investigate the roles and contributions of women who inhabited the rugged terrains.

There are several publications that address the impact of fisheries on rural women. However, more empirical evidence on the gendered aspects of rural fishing families is required, for appropriate policy decisions to be made (Williams 1997). There are, for example, very few studies on the appropriation of economic returns to women's labour in the fishing industry and aquaculture. Oftentimes, assumptions are made on the gender roles in fisheries but little data is available on the causes and real effects.

This paper aims to examine the gender dimensions of fishing, in the hope to fill the gaps in the fields of fisheries and aquaculture development, specifically in Africa. It builds on the various pioneering work by Boserup (1970), Armstrong (1978; 1983), Connelly and MacDonald (1984), Ahmed (1985), Gerrard (1995) and Neis (1996). These authors have attempted national and global reviews of the roles of women in development and change in rural political economies. The work of Leach and others is also important, to place the rural, smallholder fisheries production in the context of survival strategies for families inhabiting areas close to aquatic ecosystems whether in Africa, Asia or the Western Hemisphere (Leach et. al. 1995)

Current studies in fisheries and aquaculture point to gender-based inequalities in terms of access to education, resources, knowledge, skills and modern technologies of production. Yet, there are fewer analyses or theoretical explanations on the implications of the choices women make in fishing family units for their sustainable livelihood strategies. Similarly, published articles lament the low rate of adoption of improved technologies among fish processors and traders without shedding more light on the various constraints responsible for the low rate of adoption of these technologies. One contribution in this volume will assess the implications for the choice of activities and resource allocation in rural fishing production processes. The analysis of the data might provide useful insights as to why rural women in fishing communities are relegated to labour-intensive sectors characterized by low productivity and low returns.

It is hoped that the current Proceedings will identify the social, economic and technical constraints to the diffusion of technologies relevant to rural fishing families's. Undertaking a disproportionately large share of the family's work burden does not give women access to or control over a proportionately larger share of the household cash income and consumption. This is important because the way that cash income is spent varies according to who holds control over money in the household. One of the key concerns in these papers, therefore, is to identify appropriate organizational forms that will assist women to retain control over their increased income brought in by improved investments and technologies.

Methodologies and Design

In the light of the background and objectives outlined above, this paper will bring together conceptual and empirical analyses undertaken by a multidisciplinary group of researchers. In developing their methodology, the authors gave particular consideration to the nature and availability of data and relevant documentation.

Conceptual Approaches

According to Mays (1977), man's existence became semi aquatic because he had become aware that he had arms with which to paddle; family members find movement within or across water bodies, large or small, less tiring than walking. Historical documents of the exploits of northern Indian tribes (Algonquin and Huron nations), in 1600 A.D., as well as the 'new world' discovered by Christopher Columbus, Mango Park and other sites, show that widespread systems of barter were practised. These consisted of, among other things, the paddling of lightweight 'birch bark' and 'opepe' canoes.

Tribes inhabiting marine or riverine environments were known for their prowess as the finest canoe-men and women in different parts of the world including Africa and Asia. These individuals made voyages as far away as many hundreds or thousand of miles. The various types of canoes (dugout boats) were often remarkable vessels as well as works of art. The men built the canoes that the women used for the transportation of their families and food across water bodies as well as for harvesting of aquatic animals and plants..

Fishermen like the 'canoe-borne adventurers', 'voyageurs' or 'Boschlopers' are very likely the greatest explorers and rivermen in history. They possessed very limited material goods of their own such as rifles, knives, pots, pipes, canoes and thatched huts. Although there are a few rich fishermen in different parts of the world, today, a majority are poorer than the average rural dweller. They still live a difficult existence and they still own very few material possessions, yet, they are very important contributors to the nutritional well being of various populations of the world in terms of the food supply of aquatic organisms from the wildwaters.

The Concept and Meaning of Fishing

Fishing is an ancient human tradition. It is a traditional activity involving the hunting and gathering of aquatic products for food. Fish and marine products include freshwater and ocean fish, shellfish, ocean mammals and seaweed as well as plankton (The New Encyclopedia Britannica 1973/74). They represent a major food source, which is invaluable for the protein they provide and the industrial products they produce.

Fish satisfies a vital food need for billions. Fish is also economically, socially and culturally important as a global dietary aspect of sustainable food security. However, the tradition of fishing has been transformed over several decades of human civilization to become a resource extraction industry spanning the entire globe. Currently, fishing is a vital human activity that is threatened simply because fish populations are being dangerously depleted. This issue points to the fact that nature's balance is being altered in all areas of the world's oceanic ecosystems in ways that may be irreversible. Key species in the complex and diverse web of marine and inland aquatic life are seriously threatened (FAO 2000; Gupta 1999; Pauly et. al. 2001).

Nature's limits of aquatic life have been breached by too many fishing crafts catching too many fish, often in wasteful and destructive ways. According to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), several decades of over fishing in all the major oceans has resulted in the depletion of fish stocks (FAO 1996; 2000).

Archaeological evidence from various parts of the globe showed that man learned to catch fishes in traps and nets. These fishing activities were limited at first to the lakes and rivers, but as men improved on the boats and fishing technologies, they ventured into sheltered coastal areas, river mouths and eventually farther out on to the continental shelves, relatively shallow ocean plains between the land and the deeper ocean areas. In some shelf areas where seaweed was abundant, this was also incorporated in man's diet. The catching of fish in traps and nets are still the methods used by women in most fishing communities in Nigeria, in particular (Williams and Awoyomi 1998)

Fishing technology continued to develop throughout history, employing improved and larger ships, more sophisticated fishing equipment, and various food preservation methods. In the middle of the 20th century, man became concerned with greater utilization of the resources of the world's waters to feed an expanding population and especially in filling the need for high protein foods. At the same time, he became aware of the effects of over fishing and the importance of conservation measures (FAO 1996; 2000).

Men, Women and Children in Fishing

Binkley (1995), Gerrard (1995), Neis (1996) Neis et. al. (1999) and Williams (1996) published various articles on the coping strategies of fishing families in the face of crisis. These studies showed that women were up to the task when crisis loomed in the fishing industry. Fishing is a primary occupation in all fishing families, especially in North America and North Norway. Binkley (1995), for instance, discussed the coping strategies of offshore fishing families in Canada after the collapse of the fishing industry. Gerrard (1995) examined the changing conditions of women's activities in the North Norwegian fishing communities. Neis (1996) and Williams (1996) looked at women's lives during the fishery crisis in Canada. In all these articles, the lives of the fishing families were at risk and they felt as if they have been cut adrift. These women felt that if they did not do something to save the situation, their lives would be completely ruined. The women found a way out of the terrible situation by taking on jobs within the fishery sector in order to fend for their families.

Hence, one will begin to appreciate the rural political economy in most fishing communities of the world, and more so in the developing countries characterized by under-development and the prolonged dependence on primary production, which is fishing. The same is true in all rural areas where the inhabitants are dependent on the primary production in the farming, forestry and/or mining sectors. All these activities take place within small rural single resource communities. Therefore, in each of these primary resource sectors, there will be a process of transformation from family household based independent commodity production to corporate production and wage labour (Rocheleau et al. 1995).

In May of 2000, Barbara Neis' brought together a group of fisheries stakeholders from various parts of the globe to discuss 'gender, globalization and fisheries'. The meeting was held at a resort in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. At the close of the International Conference, the participants issued a strong communiqué in support of a 'Gender, Globalization and Fisheries Network,':

We, the women and men of the Gender, Globalization and the Fisheries Network, have identified concrete ways in which globalization has hurt women, their families, and coastal communities worldwide. Recurring themes that demand urgent action emerged from the research and testimony.

We include Atlantic Canadian fish workers, regional, national and international researchers and community development workers from Canada, First Nations, Tanzania, Chile, Gambia, Iceland, Mexico, USA, Norway, Brazil, India, Vietnam, Nigeria, Cuba, Spain, Denmark, the Philippines and Thailand.

We want to preserve the positive aspects of our cultures and heritage, and ensure that people who live in coastal communities have equal access, control, and preferential user rights of the coastal fishery. We insist that a clean and healthy ocean must have priority over the development of polluting industries.

Women have always played a crucial and active role in fisheries and in sustaining life in their communities. Yet, in countries all over the world, they have been largely ignored. Women's political decisions must shape policy and we need to put warm hearts into decision-making bodies.

We need to stop the encroachment of industrial and other destructive fisheries, which deplete marine life. We reject large tourist projects that push people out of traditional fishing grounds and communities. Tourism should complement the small-scale fisheries of coastal communities, leaving gentle ecological footprints on our landscapes.

We are concerned with the way our national governments give up to multinational corporations their responsibility to protect citizens' rights and inheritance. These corporations control our resources and economies with insufficient responsibility to protect and conserve them. We support the rights of aboriginal peoples to have access to the fishery. The costs of providing equitable access to the fishery must be borne by all citizens. In Canada, we also support the collaborative efforts of both native and non natives to find ways to share the fishery.

During the past week, we have been moved by the realities of technology's destructive impacts on fishery resources and the ways it is forcing fisherpeople into bankruptcy. It is also eliminating jobs and livelihoods in both north and south, and threatening the health of fishworkers. Technology should be designed to produce not only a quality product but also a safe working environment.

The concerns of coastal and rural communities must be central to government policy, fisheries management, and international trade agreements. Socially responsible policy would not abandon the health of our environments and people to unfettered international competition.

One of women's biggest challenges is to have our issues addressed within existing promoted networking among academics and people living in coastal communities. We have made a commitment to share information and ideas, making them accessible and useful to everyone, particularly those coastal community peoples who are struggling to survive. We commit to research that is ethical and responsive to the needs of coastal communities. We recognize the work and contribution of southern researchers, and together we aspire to create equitable south-north collaborative initiatives.

Our vision of sustainable fishery is based on coastal communities where resources are cautiously harvested using ocean-friendly technologies. It also promotes an environmentally and socially sustainable processing industry. We seek an industry, which promotes local food security rather than the production of luxury delicacies for a global market. Fishing families must be able to afford to eat fish.

Signed May 12, 2000. For more information contact Prof. Barbara Neis, MUN, Department of Sociology, University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.

A Study of Women and Fishing—Aims, Objectives and Perspective

The extent of men's, women's and children's participation in fishing activities, in the African coastal and inland aquatic systems, varies from country to country, depending on their general life situation (Veverica 1997; Africa Recovery 2002). The current Proceedings will, therefore, record the various studies on women and fishing from as many countries as possible with the available and relevant information. The general aims, objectives and perspective are to re-examine issues related to designs of worker and household surveys in fishing communities. Attempts should be made to collect data regarding work histories and incomes of fishing families. Information on the household division of labour and household production, unpaid labour, and on the work/income sharing patterns of fishing families. It is hoped that, an examination of this data from the perspectives of women will necessitate a re-think of what has been going on in the lives of fishing families.

It is also hoped that information from these studies will give additional data on particular household types than are usually reported. Additionally, there may be useful information on the linkages between the economy of one community and another so as to understand how employment patterns of different households are related.

Prospects and Strategies for Change: An Institutional Perspective – Family and Household Relationship

The family is usually made up of the father who is a fisherman by trade and a mother who may have belonged to a fishing family and, therefore, is knowledgeable about fishing. She would have learnt fishing as a way of life and, in the marriage of these two people, it represents a family from a fishing background (Palsson 1991).

The fisherman is often in need of extra hands to assist him in his fishing activities. He is usually happy when any of the children show a special affinity for the aquatic way of life. The fisherman does not really mind the gender of the children; what is of utmost interest to him as a parent is the child's affinity for the aquatic way. He is happy because he can share this love for the wild lifestyle with his own flesh and blood. All he cares about is the fact that he is going out fishing, whether as a sport or a profession, with one or more of his children (Palsson 1991).

Women and their children are crucial in the work related to fishing, thus, it is often compulsory for a fisher's wife or his daughter(s) and/or his sisters to assist him or the family in general when there is work to be carried out. Like their parents and grandparents before them, these women loved the aquatic ecosystem—the rivers, the creeks and lagoons in which their parents and grandparents fished as adults. More often than not, these women lived in the same house where their fathers and grandfathers were born and raised. This implies that they enjoyed the fact that they were following in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents before them.

The global economic state of affairs in the 21st century is compelling to some of these women to take over the activities of their husbands and/or replace the hired labour that have worked for their families. Moreover, they wish to do this in order to maintain their economic status as much as possible. These women double up as labour on fishing expeditions with their husbands, and by doing so save on the labour costs their husbands would have to otherwise pay.

Work Structures: Hierarchies and Schedules

Artisanal fisheries provide fishing families with fish products for food as well as income generating strategies for survival. The activities of women who are involved in the fishing industry in Nigeria and numerous other developing and developed countries provide approximately a quarter percent of the world's fish catch (Rocheleau et. al. 1995; FAO 1996; 2000). The artisanal fishery is therefore an important source of food, income and employment in the developing economies as shown below. Additionally, tens of millions of rural fishing families earn their living from fisheries and related activities. These fishers who are women and men are still some of the poorest and most neglected groups within the world's societies, more so than most, the rural fisherwomen.

The various pressures limiting women's full participation in other areas of agricultural production are equally relevant to fisheries and aquaculture. Demands on women's time, restricted access to land and water activities, technical know-how and credit facilities continually keep these women as well as poor fishermen and farmers on the sidelines of an industry which has untold benefits, in development terms for women, men and youths in rural communities.

The various photographs shown by presenters at this Symposium indicate the extent the survival and well being of fishing communities depend on women's contributions to the survival strategies in partnership with the men's fishing activities. Women, men and youths along the coasts and inland riverine communities in most parts of the world traditionally:

- catch fish with nets, traps, baiting or diving;
- raise fish and crustaceans;
- make and repair nets and traps;
- assist men with launching and beaching operations;
- assist in sorting and gutting the haul;
- process and market the catch.

These activities often represent income generating strategies that receive no direct financial reward. In some regions of the world, especially in Southeast Asia, women have made some headway as fish farmers. However, in most African countries as reported in this Proceedings, women, in comparison to the men, lack the influence or significant presence in fish farming as an enterprise or in the policy-making and planning for strategies to improve their livelihood. Moreover, many women have reported that being a fish farmer has not meant less work or fewer responsibilities in other areas of their lives such as running the farm or the household (Veverica 1997).

At the same time, although many have not encountered resistance to their fishing work, they have received little active support. In many developing countries, especially in Africa and Asia, women play a primary role in the post-harvest activities, both the processing and marketing of fish thereby generating employment and supplementary incomes for rural households. In West Africa, for example, women who process and market fish often finance men's fishing operations in exchange for a privileged price on the catch, as reported in the papers from Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Some FAO estimates put financing of the cash flow by the women involved in fish processing and marketing at approximately 60% (FAO 1996).

Women's other important function as far as fisheries are concerned, is in the provision of food. Fishing also helps the payments for children's education, health and other family-related needs of the household. Moreover, fish is an important source of protein as well as a source of minerals, and its consumption can positively contribute to nutritional levels in rural communities.

The studies from East and West Africa show that women are more likely to spend additional income on food for the household. Therefore, efforts to support women's income generating potential can have added health benefits for the entire household in general.

Many countries fail to count women's fishing activities because they are not located offshore as the fishing activities of men. As a result, those who trap, raise or catch fish in rivers, streams or lakes, and women who assist with the catch when it comes to shore, are often overlooked. Officially neglecting to recognize these activities means that rural fisherwomen are usually banned from membership in professional fishing organizations and ignored by credit, training or other programmes designed for those involved in fisheries.

Women involved in fish farming often work with the lowest levels of technology. The experience of women in the industrialized countries, however, confirms the observation that the introduction of modern technology can serve to marginalize women. As the fisheries sectors in many of these countries became commercialized, employment opportunities for women did not improve. Instead, women found themselves relegated to menial tasks at very low pay, such as line work in filleting and canning factories, or heading, peeling and sorting shrimp or catfish, as is the case in central Alabama.

Economic Conditions

Economic relations are the obligations of both man and woman who are the founding parents in the household (Leach et. al. 1995). In the African as well as in many developing economies, children in the household are also included in the struggle for survival, especially so in fishing families (Veverica, 1997).

Women are known to bring seven values into the partnership of marriage and these values are articulated in very clear terms by Morris (1999). These values come from women's many life experiences. This situation is corroborated by women who are practitioners in the fishing industry within the rural enclaves, and several of the authors have documented this in their papers. These values need to be emphasised because they are the lenses through which one sees and assesses the various experiences of life.

Often, the very first value lens come from one's family and it reflects the cultural and societal norms and beliefs. Thus, the dominant group in the society, in this case the fishing industry, is the group of male members. Over centuries of fishing, men have had their say about which of the values are 'true and accurate.' Likewise, all individuals have been socialized to believe that one's own life experiences are only real when they match those values as dictated by the dominant culture of the male members of their society. Throughout the world, women's life experiences within fishing families are often discounted and seen as less than valid.

In the 21st century, gendered analysis of livelihood strategies are acceptable as a valid approach to issues of poverty reduction as well as food security improvement. In the same way, one can examine the stories of women involved in the fishing industry as well as measure the progress achieved in the development of aquaculture as an alternative process of sustaining the fishing industry. An equitable partnership in society, even in rural fishing families can and will happen when the life experiences of the women are considered as significant and as real as those of the men. To this end, the Northwest Women's Institute's documentation and summary of the values of rural fishing women are presented here. It is hoped that this will serve as a catalyst to stimulate thinking that will go into listing the necessary research activities, as well as the agenda for the future of fisheries and aquacultural development in the 21st century.

- Economic stability and reasonable equity in society are the only solid foundations for peace and progress of the citizenry: most women in fishing families understand the feelings of economic vulnerability and lesser social status that have come about through no fault of their own. These women know that injustice results in anger, resentment, passive aggression and outright violence.
- Children require sacrifice on the part of adults: women too often know this feeling at a visceral level. They are aware that whatever decision made needs a long-range perspective. They are aware that environmental decisions must be based on the principles of stewardship for the children including those yet unborn. They know that economic decisions that will eventually become a burden to future generations must be resisted at all cost.
- Individual rights must be balanced with a strong sense of responsibility to the community: women are alive to the myths of the dominant society teaching independence and self-sufficiency as misleading and misguided. Women know that human beings are all profoundly interconnected and interdependent.
- Cooperation and a spirit of negotiation are essential to positive long term relationships and productivity: women have little sense of 'losing face' and are usually more interested in maintaining relationships than in 'winning.' Women tend to look for areas of agreement rather than difference. The civility and gentle style of humour, which have been cultivated in women for generations, are therefore an important aspect of cooperation and negotiation.
- Peoples' welfare is the most important factor in any issue: women do see things 'personally;' they tend to consider the impact of any decision on the people involved and feel that how people are treated in any process is as important as any result. They seldom believe that the 'ends justify the means.'

- Honouring the spiritual dimension of life is critical to a life well lived: in most cultures, women have been the primary nurturers of the spiritual life in the home and early childhood years. Interestingly, the fishermen believe that the spiritual deity of the sea is a 'woman' - MAMMY WATER OR THE MERMAID' Women from the beginning of life forms have been expected to model morality in a global society that teaches double standards for men and women. Hence, honouring the spiritual is vital for men and children, as well.
- Physical violence is not a solution to any problem: since females are generally smaller and less physically powerful than males, women have not learnt to rely on physical strength as a means to enforce control over others. Women have had to learn good communication skills to resolve conflicts. Thus, men are praised when they carry out adventurous feats conquering the wild waters, but not so the women who have been relegated to the life of powerlessness. Society must begin to recognize that these approaches are more valuable and beneficial than domination.

Political Institutions

FAO, in collaboration with the Department for International Development (UK) (DFID), ICLARM-The World Fish Centre, the European Union (EU) and other agencies, is developing projects to meet the needs of women by combining income-generating activities with education in nutrition and livelihood strategies for improving food security and poverty reduction in most developing economies. Women are taught how to keep and prepare fish with an emphasis on available species. In Lesotho, and other countries in southern Africa, women are playing a central role in managing small household ponds, part of a wider project that assesses the impact of small-scale aquaculture on nutrition. Employing a multi-disciplinary approach, the project brings together nutrition, public health and fisheries expertise. Fish produced in the pond are either eaten directly or sold to provide income for the purchase of other foods. Another challenge is to reduce post-harvest losses; this is an approach, which combines appropriate technologies and trained personnel. Post-harvest processes are aimed at:

- improved smoking, salting and drying techniques are being introduced with good results;
- Chorkor ovens developed to smoke fish landed by artisanal fisheries in Ghana and Nigeria are helping to reduce the consumption of firewood, lighten the workload of women and improve incomes;
- practical, action-oriented projects carried out at the village level are the focus of the proposed agenda for fisheries and aquaculture research for the 21st century.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the foregoing discussions that fishing is not an exclusive activity of men, even though, men dominate it. There are still some communities where women fish for survival and for natural livelihood. Traditionally, it has been perceived that documenting the aspects that show women fishing is not news and as such not significant as a publication. Such past actions confirm the natural bias that fishing is by tradition a male occupation. There is limited documentation on the activities of women and children who have or are still actively participating in fisheries activities for survival. Following this section, various reports from East and West African fishing communities will be presented on the issues of women and their participation in the fishing industry.

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