

## Supporting women in fisheries

*Paper prepared by the Women's Fisheries Development Section, Secretariat of the Pacific Community*

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The concept of “women in fisheries” continues to baffle and amuse those who believe that fisheries are the exclusive domain of men. The view is that men use an array of gear and employ techniques requiring dexterity to catch fish. Women, on the other hand, do not catch fish but merely walk along the reef picking up shellfish by hand. This generalisation of women's involvement in fisheries is based on the restricted definition of what is entailed in “fisheries”. There is a saying, “men only catch fish, while women do everything else”, which refers to the active role women play in the preparation and sale of marine resources. Studies by Schoeffel (1985), Chapman (1987), Mathews (1991), the Commonwealth Secretariat (1989, 1990) and others have shown that many women do catch fish using poles and lines, nets and other techniques employed by men. In addition, they are responsible for gutting, drying, salting, and preparing the catch for preservation and consumption, and in most island countries are exclusively responsible for the marketing of the catch.

However, recognising that women play a significant role in the fisheries sector does not necessarily mean that they are accorded the support required for development. This paper takes a look at the rationale for supporting women in fisheries, looks at the type of assistance required, and provides suggestions for support, examples of national and regional initiatives and areas for future development.

### **Supporting women in fisheries — Why bother?**

In countries of the region, the subsistence fishing carried out by women — catching lagoon resources primarily for the family diet — is not seen as a priority development area. With limited finances to support development initiatives, the tendency of national planners is to invest in research, training, equipment, and credit resources for developing commercial, export-oriented fishing activities. The aim is to encourage activities that will bring in income for the country. Figures documenting the contribution of commercial fisheries to national revenue justify the support provided each year.

However, a closer look at the activities of women shows that women contribute not only to the

national revenue of many island countries, but to the well-being of the population as a whole, as detailed below:

### **1. Commercial value of women's fishing activities**

In many island countries, women harvest marine resources of commercial value. These resources include beche-de-mer, trochus, black pearl oysters and freshwater clams. Indeed in countries with limited tuna and other deep-sea resources, the financial contribution to the national budget from such resources as trochus and black pearl oysters may be significant.

### **2. Provision of protein in diets**

Women tend to fish every day, while men fish less often. In some instances, women's fish collection may actually contribute more substantially to Pacific Island diets than men's efforts (Mathews 1991). In countries with access to limited or expensive meat and dairy resources, there is a dependence on the dietary protein provided by shellfish, crustaceans, seaweed and reef fish caught by women.

### **3. The importance of coastal subsistence fisheries**

According to Ram-Bidesi (1994), the subsistence sector (to which women's fisheries belong) supports more than three and a half million people in the Pacific today, almost two thirds of the region's entire population. Figures for the mean annual coastal fisheries production of the region from 1989 to 1994 show the total subsistence catch of 83,914 tonnes to be nearly four times that of the total commercial catch at 24,325 tonnes (Dalzell et al. 1995).

### **4. Fisherwomen as resource banks of information**

Because they fish on a daily basis, women possess a vast knowledge of the biology and ecology of marine resources. Their knowledge of local distribution, relative abundance, “catchability” and daily seasonal variability of resources, appropriate procurement techniques and inter-relationships between these factors is their forte and outside the domain

of most men's expertise (Chapman 1987). For this reason, Botkin (1980, cited in Chapman 1987) has recommended that in Fiji, women rather than men should be consulted about fisheries matters.

### **5. The co-operation of women as resource users to achieve sustainable development**

Possibly every national fisheries development plan in the region will include the goal of developing and managing fisheries resources on a sustainable basis. However, the focus may be on gathering data solely on the dynamics of resources (population, distribution, life cycles) while forgetting the role of resource users in exploiting the resources. Where there is research carried out on the habits of resource users, it may only focus on fishermen. In order to get a comprehensive view of resource exploitation, the activities of both fishermen and fisherwomen must be taken into consideration. The promotion of sustainable development requires both comprehensive data, as well as the participation of all resource users. In this respect, two-way communication is necessary between the resource users and the resource managers.

Accepting that women in fisheries are worthy of support leads to the next step of determining the type of support required by them.

#### **What do women in fisheries want?**

In many countries it may be difficult to ascertain what support women in the fisheries sector actually require. Written information documenting their activities may be absent and oral information sketchy. In addition, there may be little interaction between fisheries departments, women's government and non-government agencies, and fisherwomen.

However, a number of countries and organisations in the region have carried out research to determine the needs of women in fisheries. Feedback from fisherwomen concerning the type of assistance required from fisheries departments includes information on alternative fishing techniques, provision of fishing gear, credit, training in marketing and management skills, and the improvement of market facilities.

The availability of transport to the market and restaurants to sell marine products is a common problem facing women. Transportation to the collection area is also a problem for women as they have limited or no access to fishing boats. In addition, storage and processing facilities are lacking in many countries. Women would like to market more than they do but lack the facilities to store and prepare quality seafood products.

Assistance can therefore be classified into two areas: the provision of information and training, and the provision of support services including

credit, equipment and infrastructure services such as transport, storage and processing facilities.

#### **Where to begin? National initiatives**

Once the decision has been taken by a national government to support women in fisheries, the challenge is to decide where to begin. Over the past 18 months, a number of fisheries departments have contacted the SPC Women's Fisheries Development Project for assistance in incorporating the interests of women within fisheries development programmes.

A look at national support initiatives taken by such countries as Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu show that the first step has been to hold a round-table meeting of fisherwomen and representatives of fisheries, internal affairs, development ministries and women's government and non government agencies to determine the ways in which women in the fisheries sector can be provided with assistance. Such meetings have led to the formulation of a policy geared to encourage the development and support of women in fisheries activities. The input of women's organisations such as the National Council of Women has been beneficial in developing such a policy. However, a policy in itself is not of benefit unless there is a formal mechanism for implementing policy strategies.

In Papua New Guinea, there is the "Women in Fisheries Development Project Steering Committee", which acts as a formal decision-making body for implementing the work programme in support of women's activities. Working closely with the National Council of Women, and the Department of Religion, Home Affairs and Youth, the National Fisheries Authority has brought together the technical expertise of fisheries personnel and the networking of women's organisations to provide training to village women in developing income-generating ventures.

Tonga is another country that has taken formal steps within the fisheries department. The Tonga Ministry of Fisheries has been structured to include a unit responsible for "women's development". Since its establishment in 1989, the unit has been involved in executing extension work in rural areas for both men and women (Ngahe 1995; Ngahe and Vichman 1995).

Where countries may lack a formal policy and mechanism for supporting women's projects in fisheries, assistance may be provided on an ad hoc basis.

Fisheries departments tend to form links with fisherwomen through the provision of training programmes. Examples include the provision of workshops on freshwater clam (Fiji), beche-dermer (Vanuatu) and post-harvest handling (Kiribati and Solomon Islands). However, although

training is extremely beneficial, attention must be paid to ensuring support services are available. For example, there is no point teaching women how to process fish and market fish if ice is not readily accessible and market facilities are non-existent.

In addition, the provision of training on setting up a seafood business is not feasible if there are no credit schemes available to provide loans to potential businesswomen. The task then is to ensure that support services are in place (access to water, fuel, transport, credit and equipment) in order to implement the knowledge gained through training.

In order to make women more self sufficient, countries have encouraged income-generating activities. Examples of such ventures include clam farming (Solomon Islands, Palau), prawn farming (Solomon Islands), seaweed farming (Kiribati, Fiji), freshwater clam fishing (Fiji), tilapia farming (Fiji), and beche-de-mer fishing (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Tonga).

#### **How can the SPC Women's Fisheries Development Project provide support?**

A progress report on the activities of the SPC Women's Fisheries Development Project (WFDP) shows that the type of support provided over the last 18 months has tended to be in four main areas: providing a mechanism for regional networking; providing technical advice to fisheries governments on supporting women in fisheries activities; supporting research into collecting information on the activities and needs of women in fisheries; and the provision of training.

However, although information concerning the services of the WFDP has been distributed to all the member countries of the region, requests for assistance tend to come from about a third of member countries. With the project ending in February 1997, the question is whether member countries feel there is a need to continue the project.

Should member countries decide that the project should be extended beyond February 1997, donor funds will be needed to support continuation. With Canadian funding ending, other donors have been approached for assistance. Unfortunately, to date, donors appear to be interested in providing only short-term support; for example, offering to finance a national or regional workshop. However, if deemed necessary by member countries, every attempt will be made to secure continued funding for the project.

Although the future work programme of the project will need to be guided by member countries, possible suggestions for future activities include the following:

1. Research through the carrying out of in-depth country assessments to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on the role of women in the fisheries sector.
2. The provision of training programmes.
3. In-country training attachments. Where necessary, attachments for women to undertake specialised training in other countries can be arranged by the project. In addition, the transfer of technical expertise from one country to another can be encouraged.
4. The maintenance of a regional network of information exchange. One mechanism for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience concerning the participation of women in fisheries is the creation of a Special Interest Group newsletter.

On the other hand, should member countries feel that the WFDP is of low priority then a number of other avenues can be explored. Apart from terminating the project altogether, one option is for it to be merged into an existing Coastal Fisheries Project. A second option is for the project to be merged into an existing Commission Programme. The activities of women in fisheries include issues of health and nutrition, household food security, and women in development and as such the possibility of transferring the project to another programme is worth exploring.

Whatever the outcome, ideally, one would hope that the ultimate decision concerning the future of regional support for women in fisheries is made by fisheries departments in collaboration with fisherwomen, and representatives of women's government and non-government organisations.

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