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Caribbean Women in Fishing Economies

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ABSTRACT

There is little information in the literature on the role of women in fishing communities in the Caribbean and in much of the world. From the information available, women are involved directly in some aspects of fishing, community work that supports the fishing economy in general, and household work that provides a support system for fishers. When Fisheries Officers in 13 Caribbean countries were asked their perception and assessment on the role of women in fishing economies, they ranked women's participation "high" for marketing and processing, "low" for fishing and "medium" for investing. In the Caribbean, there is little or no recognition of women's work in fishing communities. However, their contribution to some aspects of the fishing economy may be significant and warrants attention.

KEY WORDS: Caribbean, fishing economies, women fishing

Mujeres del Caribe en la Economía Pesquera

Las mujeres en economías del Caribe de la pesca están implicadas activamente en la comercialización y distribución, procesando, invirtiendo, y pescando en un grado inferior. En el Caribe, como el resto del mundo, hay poco o nada de reconocimiento del trabajo de las mujeres en comunidades de la pesca. Su contribución se ha descrito como insignificante. Pero estas mujeres insignificantes e invisibles deben participar en el planeamiento de la gerencia de las industrias pesqueras y policy-making, pues son el corazón de las comunidades de la pesca.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Caribe, economías pesqueras, pescadoras

INTRODUCTION

Women in some parts of the world and the Caribbean make invisible yet important contribution to fishing communities (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1998, Jentoft 1999). From the sparse information available in the literature, women are involved in community and household work, personal care, and fishing economies.

In the rest of the world, women's contribution includes community work (culture, politics, social class, kin organization), household work (taking care of the family unit), individual care (self-esteem, social honour), and being involved in fishing economies (marketing, processing, fishing). At the community, household, and individual levels, the roles which women play in establishing the family and developing kinship within community are often underrated (Jentoft 1999). Kinship

is the basis of economic cooperation and social structure (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1998). Women's non-monetary work within the household and community also support and strengthen community cohesiveness (Pramanik 1994, 1996, Larkin 1995, Norr and Norr 1997).

Women's roles in fishing economies are important contribution to the livelihood strategies adopted by the household. Marketing and distribution can be specific to different cultures and/or country. In some fishing communities, women are solely responsible for the fish once they are landed (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988, Schweitzer de Grys 1988, Johnsen 1992, Geheb 1995, Norr and Norr 1997). While in other cultures, men are solely responsible for marketing and distribution. Women are also involved in fish processing, such as gutting, sun-drying, smoking, salting, canning, and freezing. In some communities women are wage labourers in fish processing plants (Muszynski 1987, Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988, Gulati 1988, Silk 1994). Women play an active role in subsistence, non-commercial, and commercial fishing. They exploit marine and riverine finfish and shellfish (Chapman 1987, Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988, Pramanik 1994, 1996, Jentoft 1999, White et al. 2000, Pramanik and Nandi 2001, Fields, 2001). Women have been known to captain boats (Nadel and Davis 1988), work aboard vessels as cooks, deck hand and crew (Allison 1988), and perform minor tasks to support fishing activities e.g. net repair and making (Pramanik 1994, Norr and Norr 1997). Women active in processing and marketing have also moved into positions as entrepreneurs who finance their own boat and gears (Gulati 1988). Some are involved in non-fishing economic activities, part of the economic support system of fishing communities. A few women are involved in giving loans to fishermen, operating small enterprises such as small snack stores, bars, restaurants and making and selling alcohol (Norr and Norr 1997).

As in the rest of the world, Caribbean women play a central role in fishing communities (Williams 1827, Wojtowicz 1950, Davenport 1954, Comitas 1962, Aronoff 1967, Rudder 1987, Williams 1990, Smith and Koester 2001). The objective of this paper is to summarize available information on the roles of women in Caribbean fisheries and to document the perceived roles of women in Caribbean fishing economies.

METHODS

A literature review was conducted to obtain information on Caribbean women in fishing communities. Since information in the literature was sparse, a survey was undertaken. Directors of Fisheries, Fisheries Officers, and knowledgeable individuals in 13 Caribbean countries were asked to give their perception on the roles of women in fishing economies. Officers from Antigua and Barbuda (ANT), Barbados (BAR), Belize (BZE), Commonwealth of Dominica (DOM), Grenada (GRE), Guyana (GUY), Jamaica (JAM), St. Kitts (SKN) and Nevis (NEV), St. Lucia (SLU), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG), and Trinidad (TRI) & Tobago (TOB) were asked to complete a short questionnaire. The information generated provided baseline information on women in Caribbean fishing communities. Further

work is being carried out to obtain information on social and economic contribution of women in Gouyave, Grenada, as part of a larger study.

RESULTS

Literature Contribution on Women in Caribbean Fishing Communities

In the Caribbean, few studies have been done on women's roles in fishing communities. Some information was available on women's roles in fishing economies, but very little of their social contribution. In many instances, the literature did not separate information by gender.

Community and Household Work — There was very little information on women's community, individual, and household work in fishing communities. McConney (1995) pointed out that networking and reciprocity seem to differ by gender, but stated that these concepts have not been applied to eastern Caribbean fishing industry.

In many fishing communities, the primary occupation of males is harvesting. Women's roles are multiple and diverse. They not only participate in increasing the outputs from fishing economy, but they engage in other livelihood activities, such as, managing household finances and taking care of the family. Rudder (1987) wrote about "Jean", a 45 year old woman who has 2 daughters and 1 son and lives with her husband in Vieux Fort, St. Lucia. She purchased fish wholesale; managed her husband's four boats; owned a grocery store, a bakery, and a restaurant, and was a member of the fisherman's cooperative. In this example, Jean took care of her family, provided employment for community members, and managed the fishing business.

Fishing Economies — The literature gives many examples of women's involvement in marketing and distribution. In Antigua and Barbuda, marketing was the main activity in which women were engaged (Williams 1990). Some 63 of the women interviewed were involved in marketing of fish. Williams, 1990 noted that some 20 of persons who owned large fish-marketing operations, were women. In Lances Bay Jamaica, there was a pattern of cooperation between fishing crews and women market agents in the village (Comitas 1962). In Dieppe Bay, St. Kitts, fishers gave their fish to women who worked full time at selling them (Aronoff 1967). In St. Lucia, women were involved in both wholesale and retail marketing of fish (Rudder 1987). In The Virgin Island USA, women would sit all day in the markets with their straps of 'bright-hued' fish (Wojtowicz 1950). Williams (1990) reported that in Antigua and Barbuda 80 percent of women in the study were involved in processing. They used two methods of processing — icing and cooking. Regarding women investors, there was little information in the literature. In Barbados, females owned 7.6 of day boats, and 8.5 of the "iceboats" (boats which carry ice and do multi-day

trips) and longliners (McConney 1995). In Jamaica 7 of registered boat owners were female (Fisheries Division 2002).

To a lesser extent, women, were also involved in fishing. On the island of Caye Caulker, Belize, Sutherland (1986: 88) reported,

“Women may line fish at times, learn to spot lobster traps, or clean the inside of a boat, but they do not become fishermen”.

Williams (1990) noted that very few Antiguan women were involved in fish harvesting. Those actively fishing were involved in spearfishing, SCUBA diving, beachseine, and sport fishing. In Jamaica only 1 of registered crew members were female (Fisheries Divisio 2002). In St. Lucia, women and teenagers often dived for sea urchins (“sea eggs”); children would break the shells, and both men and women prepared them (Smith and Koester 2001).

Perception of Women’s Roles in Caribbean Fishing Economies

This section presents perceptions from Caribbean area Fisheries Officers and Director of Fisheries of women’s roles in fishing economies. The main areas of involvement - mean rank from 1 high involvement to 4 low involvement - were marketing and distribution (1.5), processing (1.9), investing (2.7), and fishing (3.8) (Table 1). In Belize, Guyana, Nevis, Trinidad, and Tobago processing was the main area of involvement.

Table 1. Perceived ranked order of female involvement in fishing economies in 13 Caribbean countries.

Activities	A N T	B A R	B Z R	D O M	G R E	G U Y	J A M	S A M	N E V	S T V	S T R	T R I	T R I	N	Mean rank
Marketing & Distribution	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	3	13	1.5
Processing	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	4	1	2	4	1	1	13	1.9
Investing	3	3		3	3	3	3	2		3	2	3	2	11	2.7
Fishing	4	4		4	4		4	3		4	3	4	4	10	3.8

(KEY: 1-high involvement to 4-low involvement)

Marketing and Distribution — Caribbean women were mainly involved in wholesale and retail marketing and distribution of fishery products. In all 13 countries women retailed fish (Table 2).

Table 2. Perceived women's involvement in marketing and distribution

Activities	A N T	B A R	B Z E	D O M	G R E	G U E	J A M	S A N	S K E	S L V	S V G	T R I	T B O	Countries Involved N = 13
Wholesale	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	69
Retail	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100

Processing—Fish processing methods includes icing, salting, smoking, drying, and the making of fish paste, fish crackers, and fish balls. Women either earned wages in processing plants, or processed fish (gutting, fillets) in the markets or fish landing sites. Demersal finfish, flying fish, and offshore pelagics were the main fish types processed in plants (Table 3).

Table 3. Perception of women's activities in fish processing, markets, and fish plants.

Fish Type	A N T	B A R	B Z E	D O M	G R E	G U E	J A M	S A N	S K E	S L V	S V G	T R I	T B O
Demersal finfish	b		b				b	b	b				b
Flying fish	b			b						b			b b
Offshore pelagics			b			b			b	b		b	b b
Conch				b			b	b				b	
Lobster			b				b					b	
Shrimp & groundfish						b							b
Shark										b			

Investing—Women invested in boats and gear, processing establishment, export companies, gear and tackle store, and vehicles for distribution. Of all the countries investigated 85 percent reported that women owned boats and gear (Table 4). This suggests that although women were not actively involved in fishing, they owned the boats from which men fished.

Table 4. Perceived investment of women in Caribbean fishing economies

Activities	A N T	B A R	D O M	G R E	G U E	J A M	S A N	S K E	S L V	S V G	T R I	T B O	Total Countries N = 13
Boat and gear owner	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	85
Processing establishment owner				✓				✓			✓		23
Export company owner											✓		6
Gear & tackle shop owner						✓					✓		15
Vehicle owners in distribution			✓			✓							15

Fishing— Of the four kinds of economic activities, fishing was the least active area for women's involvement. Eighty-five percent of the countries reported that women were involved in fishing in some way, but only occasionally (Table 5). Officers in Guyana and Nevis reported that women did not fish. Officers in Antigua & Barbuda (beachseine, gillnet) and St. Kitts (line, fish trap) reported that women were usually involved in fishing. Officers in the other countries reported that women fished occasionally. Horsford (Personal Communication 2002) noted that women in Barbuda would take along their speargun to catch fish if the occasion arose while diving for lobster and conch. Guiste (Personal Communication, 2002) pointed out that there are only two women in the entire Commonwealth of Dominica that fished. In Grenada seven of over 200 longline fishers were female (longline fisher, Grenada). Of the countries reported that women fished, the main gear types used were line and beachseine (Table 5).

Table 5. Perceived women's involvement in fishing

Activities	A N T	B A R	D O M	G R E	J A M	S A N	S L U	S V G	T R I	T O B	Total Countries Involved N = 10
Line (trolling, handline, longline)	*	*		*	*	**	*		*	*	8
Beachseine	**		*	*		*		*			5
Gillnet	**	*			*						3
Shrimp Trawling									*		1
Diving	*						*				1
Fish Traps						**	*				1

(KEY: *-occasionally; ***-usually)

Other Areas of Involvement — All countries, except Nevis, reported that women are involved in fishers' association/groups/cooperatives. In Barbados, women were actively involved in the Barbados National Union Fisherfolk Organization (McConney, et al. 2002). Also, in Jamaica women are members of fisherman's cooperative and associations. Barbados and Tobago also mentioned other areas of women's involvement, e.g. research, management, and training.

DISCUSSION

Accounts in the literature and opinions of Fisheries Officers point to the fact that women are involved in a substantial way in some Caribbean fisheries. However, the details of the extent of their involvement are unknown. No detailed studies were available on social and economic contribution of women to fishing

communities. Women were involved in marketing, distribution, processing, investing, and to a lesser extent fishing. But no systematic studies have been conducted in the Caribbean area on these topics. Although the survey reported in this paper is based on the perceptions of Fisheries Officers, the results of the survey can be further supported by my own work in three of the 13 Caribbean countries — Jamaica, Grenada, and Belize.

The impact of women's contribution to Caribbean fishing communities generally goes unnoticed. At times Fisheries Officers in the region assumed fishermen controlled all fishing operations, and owned and operated the vessels from which they fished, this is not always so. Take the case of the implementation phase of the data collection programme in Pagee, St. Mary, Jamaica. Staff at the Fisheries Division (FD) discussed the data collection plan, benefits and data use with fishermen. Fishermen agreed to participate with FD staff during the actual collection of catch, effort, and biological data. When the data collection started, some fishermen refused to give information or allowed FD staff to measure their fish. Later the fishermen told staff that female boat owners did not want them to talk with 'government people'. In addition, female vendors told them that they would not purchase fish handled (weighed and measured) by 'government people'. In many instances, the vendors 'own' the fish, i.e. many fishers have informal arrangements with them. One fisher said that he does not have to worry about the sale of his fish; he always sold it to one vendor. She takes the catch when demand is high and low. Sometimes when he does not have any money to purchase gas, the vendor gives him the money and credits it from the sale of his fish. At other times when the catch is bad, the vendor gives him money so he can provide for his family. Thus, fishers can be highly dependent on the vendors. Thus, when providing information on data collection activities, both male and female boat owners, vendors, fishers and (where appropriate) processors should be consulted.

Jentoft (1999) argued that women's issues, interests, and knowledge are not integrated in fisheries management. The first Maritime Conference for Women and the Fishery in Canada, identified the main strengths and limitations of women participating in policy making (Larkin 1995). The obstacles identified were: lack of confidence and low self-esteem; fear of defending their rights; and fear of large companies and international markets that dictates to government how they should manage resources. The strengths identified were: the ability to listen to the community and family; role as educators and organizers of their communities; having a sense of reality; flexibility and ability to easily adjust to change; and working for their communities. These strengths can increase networking and facilitate the integration of women's concerns in policy-making. In all the Caribbean countries studied, except Nevis, Fisheries Officers stated that women were involved in fisher associations, groups, or cooperatives. However, to what extent are they shaping fisheries policies and mobilizing communities to participate in planning in the region? Judging from the available information, the answer is, "not to any extent"; however, there are some exceptions. For example, in Jamaica, women were actively involved in management planning and policy development of the conch fishery.

In conclusion, women in the Caribbean, as in much of the world, are actively involved in fishing communities, but their activities are largely invisible to fishery managers. If the contributions of women to fishing households, communities, and fishing economies were taken into consideration, it would improve fisheries management and policy-making. So the next time you visit a fishing community, landing site, or fish market, remember the invisible women, observe closely their activities and contributions.

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