

Recognising and strengthening women's roles in post-harvest activities: what steps need to be taken?

The group met on 15 October 2008 at 16 hrs and the discussions continued until 17.30. While it had originally been foreseen that the theme would be discussed in two groups using different languages, only one group was eventually formed due to the relatively low turn-out of participants (18 in total, including facilitators). The discussions were held in French and English. Informal translation was provided to those participants that were not bilingual.

The group was facilitated by Ms Yvette Die-Quadi (FAO) and co-moderated by Ms Nalini Nayak. Ms Lena Westlund was the rapporteur.

ROLES AND RECOGNITION

The group started by identifying the different roles that women play in small-scale fisheries. There are in principal three main ways in which women engage in post-harvest work: as a partner of their fisher husband, as an independent operator (trader/processor) buying fish from fishers other than their husband or as an employee at a processing plant.

It was noted that the visibility of women and their contributions to the sector is low and that their status needs to be defined (as fish mongers, fish processors, etc). The visibility of women in fisheries needs to be improved, both with regard to the *status of women as women* and the roles that women play. One difficulty in this context is the lack of gender segregated data and statistics.

Whilst there are exceptions, there is generally a fairly clear division of labour in the fisheries sector and many family businesses are still built on this concept; men go to fish at sea and women take care of the fish once landed on shore. These *complementary roles of women and men* should be recognised.

In West Africa, it was noted that the role, duties and contributions of women have changed as subsistence fishing has more and more become a commercial activity and with the development of the cash economy. Earlier, most of the fish caught was directly consumed as food in the household and in general few monetary transactions took place. Today, fish is traded more often and there are expenses to pay. Women fish processors and traders are part of this cash economy. It was noted that, in Guinea, women contribute about 80 percent of total household expenses. However, it is more difficult for women to obtain microfinance services and other credits and there is an imbalance with regard to the access to financial resources and family responsibilities. The *social and economic role that women play in the family* needs to be recognised.

Women fish traders often prefinance fishing trips and in this sense constitute an important *source of credit*. At the same time, the role women play as partners in fishing operations is not always recognised and *women's often important share of responsibilities remains invisible*.

Women play an important role in *food security* as they regulate food fish supplies through their post harvest involvement. Women commonly have a *long-term vision* and take a particular *interest in the environment* and its safeguarding. They are however rarely involved in fisheries resource management and lack resource access rights. They are often excluded from decision making processes and in development and modernisation projects, the role of women is not always taken into account. For

example, when building new fish landing sites, women traders and processors sometimes lose their access to the landed fish.

The role of women as workers in processing plants has become increasingly important and this development in Vietnam was mentioned as an example. However, *little is known about women's working conditions in these factories.*

ACTIONS NEEDED

The group made the following recommendations for enhancing the recognition of and strengthening the roles of women in post-harvest activities:

- Women should be involved in decision-making and financial processes
- The representation of women on fishery resource management committees need to be reinforced
- When represented in decision-making and on committees, women should be empowered and provided the space and opportunities to voice their opinions
- Children should be educated to better appreciate the roles of women and men in the small-scale fisheries sector with a view to change attitudes in the longer-term
- The availability of gender segregated data needs to be improved
- Women's access to fishery resources should be improved and the 'selling out' of fishery resources on which women depend should be avoided (e.g. small pelagics in fishing agreements between the EU and West African countries)
- The working conditions of women in processing plants should be investigated and documented and women should be encouraged to ascertain their trade union rights
- Improved fish processing technologies should be developed and disseminated
- Women's access to information (e.g. on technological innovations and commercial aspects) should be facilitated
- Existing regional and sub-regional conventions related to the free movement of goods and persons should be implemented and intra-regional trade actively promoted (reduction of duties, simpler procedures, less harassments at border check points)
- Access to fish landing sites for women should be improved and the sites equipped with appropriate infrastructure (basic social infrastructure and marketing, fish processing and storage facilities)
- The space for fish processing on shores and beaches should be protected
- Fish markets should be equipped with water and toilet facilities and good standards of cleanliness should be maintained
- Women's capacities in and knowledge on business management, book keeping, credit mechanisms, technologies, etc should be strengthened
- The importance of mobile phone technology as a market information tool should be emphasised