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Oceans,
Coasts & People

Empowering women in coastal communities

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Women and men often have sharply defined roles in traditional fishing communities. Catching fish tends to be a male preserve, while women tend to be more involved in repairing nets and processing and marketing fish. Women may also gather shellfish and seaweed and do 'supplementary fishing' based close to shore. Beyond fishing, women are generally the main crop cultivators and are primarily responsible for feeding their families.¹

Yet despite their significant contribution to providing food and income, women have tended to have little input into discussions and community decisions on the management of marine resources. Similarly, women often have little or no say in how household budgets are managed, with the result that less money is spent on food, health, or education than if they held the purse strings. Women also tend to have restricted access to employment, education, and finance, and are more likely to suffer from hunger and disease.

"Most education and employment opportunities are given to men. Even when a woman is more competent and qualified for a position, the following kinds of questions are raised: Will her husband allow her to tour? Will

*family expectations and duties get in the way of her work? Will she be too outspoken? Very often, to avoid the perceived risks, the job is given to a male."*²

There is a wealth of research and experience to support the view that development assistance to improve the position of women is one of the most effective ways to improve the welfare of poor communities. However, the realities faced by many women in coastal communities are often ignored in development policies and programmes as the focus is usually on fisheries production – that is, the male-dominated catch.

WWF's experience shows that marine conservation efforts that involve women often help improve their position within the community. In this way, such efforts can directly contribute to the Millennium Development Goal on promoting gender equality and empowering women.

Becoming organized, becoming visible

Women in traditional communities often become more visible when they become more organized. Indeed, organizing community groups around female-dominated

¹ Gender and Fisheries in Gender and IRWM Resource Guide, www.genderandwater.org, see also FAO, Gender and Food Security, Fisheries at www.fao.org/gender and WorldFish Center, Global symposium on Gender and Fisheries 2006 www.worldfishcenter.org
² Kalvogas, V. (2002) Gender and conservation. Development Bulletin, No 58, p 93-95.

livelihood activities can be a first and relatively non-threatening way to lift their profile and position. Such women's groups are often associated with natural resource-based activities.

- **Getting organized for conservation**

In Senegal's Delta du Saloum Biosphere Reserve, women working on a shellfish project conducted by Enda Graf (an international NGO, in collaboration with La Fondation Internationale du Banc d'Arguin and within the Programme Régional de Conserva-

tion de la zone côtière et Marine en Afrique de l'ouest (PRCM) framework, which WWF helped establish) are protecting the shellfish resource (an important source of income for local women) and improving their skills in managing, processing, and marketing the resource. The project

has been extended to empower the women to defend their own interests and take more control over the financial aspects of their shellfish enterprises.³

The women of Gizo in the Solomon Islands have taken the lead in raising awareness about destructive activities that are damaging their rich marine environment. These women have impressed WWF project staff with "their wealth of knowledge on fishing areas, fishing seasons, and the use of resources".⁴ The initial focus of the Gizo Womens Action Group has been to raise awareness about the need to protect the marine environment, and not dumping rubbish into Gizo harbour. The GWAG also undertook clean-ups around the waterfront and on local islands, and carried out testing of the water quality around Gizo town.

Elsewhere in the Solomon Islands, women from two villages near Roviana Lagoon have helped design shellfish reserves for the protection of blood cockle and mud clams, and have played a key role in monitoring the effectiveness of the reserve. A valuable dialogue has been started between outside scientists and the women on the results of this monitoring. The women have shown a strong com-

mitment to the sustainable management of these economically important shellfish, as reflected by the following observation by two researchers who studied this project: "Local communities often opt for closing fishing areas that are either less productive or more difficult to access. Baraulu and Bulelevata women, by contrast, have chosen to close areas that are of primary importance for shellfish collection for longer-term returns."⁵

Taking up new livelihood opportunities

Traditional (and the most obvious form of) fisheries development assistance often involves providing better fishing equipment and boats. But by helping to drive the expansion and mechanization of local fisheries, these efforts can have the perverse effect of placing additional pressures on an often already depleted resource base. They also add to the net servicing and fish processing responsibilities of women, while producing little in the way of extra income for the household as a whole and reducing the time women have for their other work and income-generating activities.

To help reduce pressure on marine resources, marine conservation programmes sometimes include mea-



Aminata Sarr, Head of the Senegalese Federation of Women working in Fish Transformation (on the left), and a colleague. M'Bour, Senegal.

Woman weaving dried palm leaves. Jibondo, near Mafia Island, Tanzania.



³ PRCM (2005) Regional Coastal and Marine Conservation Program for West Africa, Annual Report 2005, p16.

⁴ Makini, J. (2005) Women making waves in Gizo town. In: South Pacific Currents No 25, April 2005, WWF South Pacific Regional Programme Office.

⁵ Shankar, A. and Weiant, P. (2003) Shellfish monitoring and women's participatory management in Roviana, Solomon Islands. SPC (Secretariat of the Pacific Community) Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin 12, May 2003.



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Women collecting sea food in tidal marshes. Nosy Be Island, Madagascar.

asures to promote alternative livelihoods (see “Boosting coastal livelihoods” fact sheet). Several of WWF’s such projects include specific efforts to help women overcome barriers to their participation in the wider economy. These include improving the ability of women to access credit, undertake paid employment, and start their own businesses.

- **Alternative livelihoods from conservation**

In the province of Northern Villa Clara in Cuba, 35 new jobs, all occupied by women, were created when a freshwater aquaculture industry was established as a way of relieving the pressure on overexploited marine areas

In the village of Mkokoni in Kenya’s Kiunga National Marine Reserve, WWF has trained women to turn discarded plastic shoes and other beach litter (which impedes nesting female turtles) into handicrafts that are sold to European and North American markets. The women can earn up to US\$65 a month from these handicrafts, often more than the men earn from fishing.

The transformation of the economy of Tortugue-

ro, Costa Rica, from being based marine turtle consumption to being based on their sustainable exploitation as a tourism resource created a new employment opportunity of tour guiding: in 2000, nearly 20 per cent of tour guides were women.

Seaweed farming has become a key source of income for about 125 women in Jibondo village within Tanzania’s Mafia Island Marine Park, largely replacing the former number one cash earner of octopus fishing. Clear gains have emerged for both the marine environment and for the women, with the farming yielding a monthly per capita income of up to \$US40 in 2002.⁶

- **New financial and business opportunities**

In the fishing community of Cayar, Senegal, women have used locally managed micro-credit funds – which are only provided for activities that respect the environment, reduce poverty, and promote development – to start vegetable and livestock farming, shop keeping, and to add value to fish products by initiating their own wholesale fish businesses instead of selling to middlemen. This has empowered the women.⁷

⁶ Rubens, J. and Kazimoto, S. (2003) Mafia Island: A demonstration case. WCPA-Marine/WWF MPA Management Effectiveness Initiative, p10.
⁷ Soumare, A. (2006) The role of women in a model of community management of fish resources and marine environments, Cayar. Gender and Water Alliance.

Breaking down stereotypes

The projects mentioned above are also breaking down gender stereotyping and helping women to claim a greater role in community decision-making.

Several of WWF's efforts to improve access to education in coastal communities (see "Building coastal community knowledge and skills" fact sheet) specifically target girls, who are frequently behind boys when it comes to enrolment in primary schools.⁸ Such efforts similarly help to reduce gender stereotyping.

- **Less rigid gender distinctions**

In Bazaruto Archipelago, Mozambique, there is evidence that once rigid gender distinctions are beginning to break down. Women and girls now sometimes pull beach seine nets and men are starting to harvest mapalo (sand oysters), traditionally a women's activity. Schools now have a narrow majority of girl students in the first years.

- **Increasing schooling opportunities for girls**

Many families living on the East African coast cannot afford to educate their daughters. In Kenya's remote Kiunga National Marine Reserve, for example, it was not unusual for secondary classes to contain no girls. WWF has awarded a number of scholarships to girls to enable them to attend secondary school, and has also provided environmental education.⁹ Further south, in Tanzania's Mafia Island Marine Park, WWF has provided 25 scholarships to girls at both primary and secondary level, and also helped to build a girls' dormitory so that the girls can stay at boarding school. The scholarships have also helped build good will amongst local communities for conservation. In Quirimbas National Park, more than 30 scholarships are given each year to girls to keep them in schools. The scholarship consists of a monthly payment to help the girls continue their schooling in the primary and secondary school. In Bazaruto Archipelago National Park, WWF is providing more than 30 scholarships for students to carry on studying in the mainland due to the lack of schools in the Islands. A number of the students are girls.



Ubian fishing family matriarch, who manages the extended family's businesses. Banggi Island, Sabah, Malaysia, Coral Triangle.

Further resources

The FAO gender and food security programme, which includes a fisheries component, can be accessed through www.fao.org/gender

The Gender and Water Alliance examines women's and development issues generally, with a key resource being their Gender and IWRM Resource Guide. www.genderandwater.org

The Secretariat of the Pacific community publishes regular and informative bulletins on women in fisheries (available through www.spc.int/coastfish/)

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⁸ United Nations (2006) The Millennium Development Goals Report 2006, p7.
⁹ MacDonald, M. (2003) Education for girls: Seeding the future in Kenya. Satya magazine September 15, 2003