

Sea safety programmes for artisanal and small-scale fishing communities: Role of gender

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Safety at sea: Improving the focus

Fishing is one of the riskiest occupations. Fishers everywhere are vulnerable to accidents, injuries and death. Some 24 000 deaths occur every year in fishing, besides an estimated 24 million non-fatal accidents annually.¹ In the developing world, accidents and deaths are frequent in small-scale fishing operations. Some of the reasons: inadequacies in safety and communication equipment, in search-and-rescue (SAR), and early warning services.

This paper discusses the role of gender in sea safety programmes for artisanal and small-scale fishing communities.

The gender-based division of labour in small-scale marine fisheries in

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developing countries is interesting: while men go fishing, women are busy processing and selling fish. But this scenario isn't uniform. In some places, the entire fisheries chain is male-dominated. It's the men who fish, sell and process the fish. In some other regions – Peru, Thailand, Philippines and the Pacific islands – women turn fishers, particularly in near-shore waters. Women have been traditional fishers in a few places. And in recent times, women have functioned as crew in fishing vessels – when vessel owners found it difficult to employ or pay male crew. It is common for women and children to engage in gleaning/collecting/ gathering of seaweed, shellfish, etc – for domestic consumption or for sale.

A noteworthy fact: people engaged in shore-side activities – which do not require the use of fishing vessels – are rarely seen as fishers. They

therefore fall outside the ambit of instruments/ programmes aimed at improving sea safety or conditions of work. At the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) that discussed the proposed *Convention on Work in the Fishing Sector*, the ICSF stressed the need to broaden the definition of a 'fisher' and thereby promote the rights of those undertaking commercial beach-seine operations, diving and gleaning – activities that do not necessarily involve the use of fishing vessels. There can be little doubt that the nature of work performed exposes this sub-group to specific hazards.

In the severe cyclone that hit Orissa, India, in November 1996, 2 560 people lost their lives, of whom as many as 1 435 were fishers. Six hundred of these died on mechanized boats at sea; 830 others were out in inshore waters collecting shrimp seed (Salagrama, 2002)². The shrimp seed collectors – women, children and men – had been away at sea before the cyclone started and had received no warning about the impending cyclone.

There are also several reports that indicate that, as coastal ecosystems face greater degradation and pollution, the health risks to those who collect/ fish in the backwaters, mangrove habitats and other coastal areas are increasing. Specific



¹ ILO (2000): *Safety and Health in the Fishing Industry: Report for discussion at the Tripartite Meeting on Safety and Health in the Fishing Industry, Geneva, 13-17 December 1999*, International Labour Office.

² Salagrama, Venkatesh (2002): *Reading the Perfect Storm, SAMUDRA Report, July 2002*.

attention clearly needs to be paid to addressing the safety and health problems faced by those working in this transitional zone that exists between land and sea.

Safety at sea programmes thus need to directly address the safety and health not merely of men and women who fish on board small-scale fishing vessels, but also of those who fish in coastal and inshore areas, often without fishing vessels. An understanding of some of the problems specific to women in the fishing sector would be an important prerequisite for the better design of these programmes – relating, for example, to sanitation facilities, the ability to swim, etc.

Safety at sea:

A community approach

In many parts of the world, fisheries is as much a way of life as a profession. Entire communities depend on the sector. An accident at sea has repercussions within the family and the community. There are many documented cases, particularly from the industrialized world, where women from fishing communities have organized themselves to draw attention to issues of safety at sea. They have demanded action by governments to improve working conditions and safety.

Example: The foreword of the book *Turning the Tide: The 1968 Trawler*

*Tragedy and the Wives' Campaign for Safety*³, by Rt. Hon. John Prescott MP, draws attention to a unique kind of political struggle that took place in the UK in 1968. The book is the story of their effective campaign for improved safety at sea.

“I was present at the wives’ meeting in Victoria Hall on Hessle Road that cold night in February 1968. It was not the kind of political meeting I was used to attending. Outside were prams, and inside, the hall was packed with women holding children and babies. Their grief was almost unbearable to witness. This was a meeting where political struggle was being experienced not as theory or ideology, but at the level where it mattered most—in the heart of a community that saw itself under threat and was determined to effect change.”

This meeting was organized in the aftermath of the trawler tragedy in 1968, when three Hull trawlers sank and lost 58 men. The women of the Hessle Road community decided that they would no longer accept the loss of their men as an accident of nature.

There are several other examples. In Iceland, from the earliest times, women from fishing communities were active in the Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue

(IASR) established in 1929. They drew attention to safety issues, to promoting Search and Rescue (SAR) groups for fishing communities around the coast⁴. They also strove to raise funds for equipment needed to facilitate search and rescue.

Women were very active in the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue (NSSR), a nationwide humanitarian and voluntary organization formed primarily to save lives and property at sea, and to provide various forms of assistance along the Norwegian coast. Similarly, the Gloucester Fishermen’s Wives Association in Massachusetts, United States, is represented on the national advisory committee concerned with fishing safety.

In the developing world as well, women have been drawing attention to safety issues. A meeting of women of fishing communities in Northern Chile, for example, organized through CONAPACH, the national fishworker organization in Chile, stressed the need to deal with the high accident rates among divers in Chile and the need to use decompression chambers⁵. In Asian countries, the struggle by fishing communities against bottom trawling is partly linked to the loss of life and property resulting from collision/ conflicts of their vessels with trawlers in inshore areas. Women have often taken an active part in these struggles. In Sumatra, Indonesia, women who have been widowed because of collisions/ conflicts between small boats and trawlers have attempted to organize themselves as part of the *Sarekat Nelayan Sumatera Utara (SNSU)*⁶. They have urged that the ban on trawling must be properly enforced.



³ This book by Rupert Creed, has been edited by Sara Hawkins and published by Back Door Press (1998).

⁴ Petursdottir, G., Hannibalsson, O., Turner, J.M.M (2001): *Safety at Sea as an integral part of fisheries management*. FAO Fisheries Circular No. 966, Rome, FAO, 2001.

⁵ Jéssica Alfaro Alvarez (2001): *Women Weaving Networks*, Yemaya No 7, August 2001.

⁶ Sharma C (2000): *Skirting the ban*. Yemaya No. 3, March 2000.

Administrators keen to promote the use of safety equipment and a culture of safety and conscious of the fact that men are away at sea and difficult to reach, have sometimes, but not often enough, aimed safety awareness campaigns not only at fishermen but also at their spouses and family members.

Safety at sea: Getting the larger picture

The following are extracts of a report⁷ from the forum on “Working Conditions and Safety at Sea and Ashore” organized during the AKTEA Conference, *Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture: Lessons from the Past, Current Actions and Dreams for the Future* which took place during 10-13 November 2004 in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The Conference brought together 170 fisherwomen, shellfish gatherers, fish processors, fish sellers and researchers, administrators, social workers and women organizers.

The issue of safety on the boats was discussed. Women felt that men’s attitude towards safety matters is driven more by machismo than by the need for family security. Women face problems in convincing the men to use safety equipment.

Some of the participants (from Portugal, Spain and France) felt that the European fishing fleet needs improved safety measures. They underlined the importance of financing the construction of new vessels with the necessary safety standards.

Deteriorating working conditions were seen as another reason for accidents at sea. These resulted from the decrease in the number of crew on board the vessels, and the longer working hours, enforced because boat owners need to economize to meet with rising investments, decreasing fish prices and higher debts. Alcohol and drug consumption on board boats were also responsible for accidents.

Some of the forum participants (from Canada, Ireland and Norway) felt that increasing the cost of



Fisherwomen awaiting the return of their menfolk from a fishing trip.

insurance may encourage more safety practices, but also place a burden on small businesses and fishing enterprises.

It was furthermore discussed that women should demand the recognition of occupational illnesses of not only men but also women working at sea, shellfish gatherers, fish sellers, etc. In Canada, shellfish processing workers are struggling with occupational asthma and with cumulative trauma disorders (like carpal tunnel syndrome).

The women delegates drew attention to technical aspects of sea safety (need for new vessels built according to safety standards), as well as to social and economic aspects responsible for compromising safety on board.

They stressed that issues of safety at sea have to be seen from a technical as well as from a social, economic and resource perspective. They said that women from fishing communities often have a direct livelihood stake in these discussions; as fisheries moves towards energy and capital-intensive forms, women with little access to capital are often ousted from the sector.

What appears to be important, therefore, is a mechanism for dialogue between administrators and fishers to identify the entire range of

issues that have a bearing on sea safety. Clearly, the issues involved are complex and linked to those of fisheries resources management and the very model of fisheries development being espoused.

Women from fishing communities, experiencing social and economic pressures in very direct ways, are well placed to take part in this dialogue. They should be encouraged to take the initiative to propose measures for a fishery that is sustainable and that ensures better returns to small-scale fishers and their communities.

And finally, there is a strong case for adopting a comprehensive approach towards reducing the vulnerability of coastal fishing communities to natural disasters on the sea and on land. There is also a strong case for integrating sea safety programmes with community-based disaster preparedness programmes.

This is especially because fishing communities in the developing world, occupying the very margins of the land mass as it were, are continually exposed to natural disasters. The December 2004 tsunami is a recent and dramatic example.

⁷ Quist, C and Frangouides, K. *A Sea of Women* (2005): SAMUDRA Report 41, July 2005.