

WOMEN IN FISHING: IMPORTANT AND MARGINALIZED?

A reflection on why there are so few registered women fishers in Norway and what the consequences might be

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Fishing in Norway is and has been a highly gendered activity with few women working on the fishing boats. Another characteristic is that the number of fishers—women and men—has decreased enormously after the cod moratorium in 1989 and the introduction of the quota system in 1990. The following table gives a good illustration:

Year	Full-time (B)				Part-time (A)				Sum	%
	Women	%	Men	%	Women	%	Men	%		
1983	182	0,64	22273	78,69	106	0,37	5743	20,29	28304	100
1988	575	1,96	21473	73,14	102	0,35	7200	24,52	29359	100
1990	554	2,01	19921	72,39	112	0,41	6931	25,19	27518	100
1993	572	2,26	18500	73,21	105	0,42	6219	24,61	25269	100
1998	530	2,49	14611	68,60	166	0,78	5991	28,13	21298	100
2003	283	1,64	12957	75,31	130	0,76	3835	22,29	17205	100
2004	281	1,81	12396	79,53	114	0,73	2795	17,93	15586	100

Table 1: Full and part-time women and men fishers in Norway, selected years 1983 – 2004²

The above table shows that women fishers in Norway registered as full-time fishers have decreased by almost 50 per cent in the last five years while the number of female part-time fishers seem to be more stable over time though with certain variations. Table 1 also shows that between 1988 and 1998, the number of female fishers was relatively stable while the number of men has decreased through the whole period, but with a higher speed after 1990. Such a heavy decrease says something about a changing fishing industry. In the following I shall go further into why there are so few women and relate this to the regulation of the Norwegian fisheries. Towards the end I shall also try to give some comments on men's changing situations and point to some social and cultural changes that fishery communities might face.

¹ This article is based on information collected as a part of the project: *Sustainable coastal culture?* financed by the Norwegian Research Council and University of Tromsø. It was prepared as a contribution to the Marathon, organized by Kvinnforsk, University of Tromsø, October 2005. Some parts of this article are also to be found in other articles I have written.

² The table is based on following statistical material:

Statistics of Norway 2004. Fishery Statistics. Fiskarar, etter fiske som leveveg. 1983-2003, (Table 1) Oslo.

Statistics of Norway 2004. Fishery Statistics. Fiskarar og registrerte fiskebåter 1987-2003, (Table 416), Oslo

Fiskeridirektoratet (Directorate of Fisheries). 2004. Fiskarar som har fiske som hovedyrke og biyrke, fordelt etter hokjønn for kvart fylke i perioden 1983- 2003 (16.8.04). Bergen.

Fiskeridirektoratet (Directorate of Fisheries). 2005. Fiskefartøy og fiskarar, konsesjonar og årlige Deltakaradgangar. År 2004. Table 38a. Bergen

Women as fishers

Following the moratorium and the first years of the quota system, Norway had the largest number of registered female fishers since the gendered registration started. The registered female fishers work on big factory ships filleting fish as well as on boats that are considered as small also within a Norwegian fishery context. In Finnmark, one of the most fishing dependent areas of Norway, I know of only one woman, who is skipper on her own boat of 14.98 metres and has her own crew. It should, however, be mentioned that through the history and even today women have been engaged in shore-related activities as wives, daughters, relatives and neighbour without having been registered. I have earlier used the concept shore or ground crew for women that carried out such types of work and thus have helped to develop an efficient fishery (Gerrard 1983).

It should also be mentioned that the number of women that have formal ownership in boats is few. In August 2004 there were in Norway 181 women that had more than 50 per cent of the owner share in fishing boats organised as companies, and 296 women that had less than 50 per cent owner share in a company.³ In the municipality of Nordkapp, close to very good cod grounds, only one woman are registered as a sole proprietor of a boat of 5.10 metres while some are registered as share holders and part owners in the type of companies mentioned above. Taking into account the fact that in the whole of Norway there are 8184 registered fishing boats⁴ of all sizes the number of female owners seems even smaller.

The Norwegian fisheries are heavy regulated by different laws and regulations: The Rawfish Act, The Participation Act, The Act of Fishing in Salt Water to mention some. In order to be registered as a fisher one has to send in an application to the Directorate of Fishery. To be accepted as a registered full-time fisher one has to have 60% of the income from fisheries, to spend at least 20 weeks fishing and earn a certain sum of money. The criteria for the part-time fishers are different. They can earn more money by means of shore work and spend less time at sea. In order to buy a fish boat with a quota one has to have been an active registered fisher at least for a year. In addition to these regulations there are also specific rules for buying and selling boats with a quota depending on the region where one lives.

Eva Munk-Madsen (1996) argued some years ago that a resource that was common property and open to “everybody”, has, with the quota system, become closed for most women— in her view, about half of the fishery population. In view of the low numbers of registered women fishers, boat owners and the fact that women in 1994 owned 192 of 16216 units of quotas, Eva Munk Madsen concluded that quotas have become *men’s formal property right* (Munk-Madsen 1996). Since Eva Munk-Madsen presented her work, even fewer women are registered and consequently fewer women have formal rights to the quotas. There are several examples of widows who have had to sell their boats with the quota even when they wanted to keep the boats and start to fish because they were not entitled as “fishers” according to the Norwegian laws that regulate fishing. This has been the case even if the woman had performed substantial

³ See table 18a and table 18b (page 102) presented in: Sametinget (Sami Parliament). 2004. *Sametingets melding om fiske som næring og kultur i kyst- og fjordområdene*. Karasjok. The table are based on information from the Directorate of Fisheries, Norway.

⁴ See table 1a: Registered vessels in the years 1925-2004 in Fiskeridirektoratet (Directorate of Fisheries). 2005. *Fiskefartøy og fiskarar, konsesjonar og årlige deltakaradganger*. År 2004, Bergen.

unpaid work related to fishing and to the boat. Examples when couples divorce can also illustrate the imbalance between women and men as far as quotas and other type of capital are concerned. Registration, formalization and a fishing boat that have been fishing in the northern part of Norway favour men. As few women have the right to quotas in Norway, it also means that many of the women now might represent a marginalized group in Norwegian fisheries with little access to the wealth that the resources in the fisheries might represent.

Fishery politics: a democratic deficit?

Why are there so few registered women in the Norwegian fisheries?

This is a question I often have asked since Norway is a country that is famous for the gender equality policy. Here I will mention some possible explanations.

First of all, it is important to remember that the majority of women in fisher families “for ages” have performed work on shore, connected to and important for the fishing boat (Gerrard 1975, 1983, 2003). However this work has, in most cases, not been registered, either by fisheries authorities, or by employment authorities. It has not been considered as a type of work that has “qualified” for membership in fishermen’s unions or resource policy-making institutions. Fishery institutions outside the community level and fishery policy have in this way been men’s domain.

In the recent years there are more known examples of women who have been active in fish harvesting and working together with their husbands. Some of them are registered fishers and have formal status. Some are also unionised and active in the Norwegian Fishermen’s Union. However, the policy developed by unions and associations seldom focuses on questions relevant for women’s situation, or recognize that women have contributed to the production. This is also mirrored in public white papers on fisheries (Gerrard 1983, Gerrard 1995, Gerrard 2003a). Fishery questions are also left out in most Norwegian white papers on gender equality (Angell 2004). An example in the opposite direction is a white paper from the Sami Parliament written and decided upon in 2004 (Sami Parliament 2004). Here women’s participation in fishery and fishery politics is heavily emphasized.

The quota system has not made it easy for the majority of women and men. Even though few women were fishing before the quota system was launched, they could under certain conditions, continue to own their boat or rent it out if their husbands passed away. This is almost impossible today since a widow seldom has the right to the quota. And, obviously, a boat without fishing rights has a low value. Today even very old boats with a quota can be sold to a very good price.

In this way I will say that it is not only fish in the market that is a commodity, fish rights through the quota system are also now a part of the market system. If we look into the quota system, at least the way it is applied in Norway, it consists of a complicated system of decisions, practices, rules and regulations on many levels that are difficult to get an overview of. The quota system can, therefore for most people, be considered as a system resulting from power that “sits in the wall”. It is rather complicated to get an insight into the existing power processes.

Fishery politics and quota questions are still men’s domain since there are few women present in institutions that take the most important decisions. The Norwegian –

Russian Fishery Commission that decides upon the total allowable catch (TAC) of cod in the Barents Sea is an example where the gender balance is very uneven. In 2004 four women and 24 men from Norway and the same number of women and men from Russia met to negotiate the for the cod stock in the Barents Sea.

An example from the national level is the committee that gives advices about the size of the quotas. This committee has always had a heavy deficit of women. These two important committees mentioned here have applied for exceptions from the gender equality act that demands 40 per cent women (or men) on public committees. The argument has been that the fishery organizations have few women as members. It is also said by representatives from the Ministry of Fisheries that few women are interested and seen as eligible for such post (Sloan 2004:87-88). In my opinion such a view also reflects the Ministry's attitudes upon whom they consider as experts in fishing as well as who should hold special offices. The result is that women have little influence when quota questions are discussed on the political levels. Some has tried to influence the policy, for example, in the committee that gives advice to the Ministry regarding fish stocks. The main pattern is that fishery policy and resource management policy still represent arenas in which some men still have the power to define the agenda. The quota system and the debate about this system can, therefore, be looked upon as a strong symbol of men's maintenance of the power in fishery policy and some men's hegemony. But, I have also heard both from women and men that women's positions in fishery policy-making only reflect their position in society. This might have been the case if only the number of registered women is taken into consideration. However, if we also consider the number of women that collaborate with men, often their spouses, in their work, I would rather say that Norwegian fishery policy is facing a democratic deficit.

When women take the lead

It should, however, be mentioned that even though little attention has been given to women in relation to resource questions, women's positions have once in a while been put on the fishery policy agenda. In the 1970s and 1980s students and researchers together with members of the Fisherwomen's Association, raised questions about women in fisheries, in fisheries communities and women's influence on fishery politics. The Fisherwomen's Association has also emphasized local welfare and cultural questions. The association was among those that put safety at sea on the political agenda. Coastal women from Sørøya in Finnmark went on the barricades in 1989 after the moratorium was declared and tried to influence policy-making. Women from the environment association and the Sami Parliament have been among those who have tried to influence the national committee discussing quotas.

Some of the 1980s' activities resulted in *The Fishing Industry's Committee for Women*. This committee put women in coastal communities and women in the different sectors of fisheries on the agenda and tried to support women and women's projects in different ways, but was not considered as a policymaking institution. They had little influence on the resource management policy. The committee lasted until the year 2000 when the Minister of Fisheries cut off financial support.

In the recent years women in the Lofoten area have tried through mass media and by circulating petitions to give more attention to the importance of coastal fishery. Female parliament members give attention to resource policy. The same has women

in the Sami Parliament done. The gender-oriented white paper, already mentioned, was a result of their work (Sami Parliament 2004). In spite of such efforts women's situation and challenges in fisheries and fishery communities and the lack of recruitment in many of the fishery districts are topics that seem to be very difficult to get on the political agenda also in the new millennium.

The “lost” generation?

So far I have been dealing with women. Table 1 also indicates severe changes in men's situation. I have not studied these changes on a national level, but looking at some local communities also gives us an impression of the changes. In one community that I know of in Finnmark there are about 20 boats, 20 local and some non-local registered fishers of whom 3 are women. All fishers are more than 30 years. The majority of women and men are more than 40 years. Today four owners or enterprises own half of the boats and quotas. The number of quotas exceeds the number of boats used in the daily fishery. This is possible due to the new arrangements that have been adopted which states that one can transfer for a limited period one quota from one boat to another boat within the same length group, for example within the group of boats from 10 to 15 metres. Two of the owners have organized the ownership in private limited companies; two others have individual or sole enterprises, the traditional ownership model in this area. In this way we see a concentration of ownership of boats and quotas and a change in the ownership pattern. The “deficit” of youngsters going into fishery is quite obvious. In this way we can see that some fishers are trying to succeed in fishery by getting more quotas, some manage with one boat and one quota, and some are leaving the fishery. The number of youngsters going into the fishery from this area is smaller than ever. For the young ones the fishery industry seems to be a closed industry.

Women, men and the future

There are not only few registered women fishers in Norway. More and more women in coastal areas today seem to have a looser connection to fishing, fisher's work and processing in general compared with the situation years ago when women contributed with an enormous amount of work (Gerrard 1975). Today they can be their husband's consultants and they share the financial burdens of the household with their partner. The majority of women are employed outside the fishing sector, for example in teaching, or in other public and private sector jobs, since fishery work has been so heavily downscaled in Norway. Young women and men move away from fishing villages (Gerrard 2003). From one point of view one could say that especially youngsters and women in fishing and fishery-related activities are the losers in the fishing industry.

But there are also other considerations to be taken into account. When women leave fisheries, fishing-related households seem to weaken or disappear. When fishing-related households weaken or disappear, fishery as a way of life for women, men and children seem to weaken. When this happens, the population in the fishing villages decreases. These tendencies have also consequences for men, especially those who are not willing to compete for more and more quotas and for the young women and men who in the future would like to go into fishing and fishery and live in fishery community.

My final consideration is, therefore, that the fishery population: women, the majority of men and the future generation can all be losers - unless we all succeed in changing the market oriented resource policy and the male hegemony in the majority of the fishery institutions!

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