

## 3. Creating the Space to Empower Women Fishers

### Lessons from the Philippines



*Women Fishers' Movement using collage to carry out an assessment*

Oxfam GB's Leadership Development Programme for Women works with four partners in the Philippines. The work involves assessing how far gender is mainstreamed into programme work, and developing action plans to ensure that women working in the fishing industry play a more active role in community-based coastal resource management and in designing fisheries policy reforms. In the course of this work, participants identified the steps necessary to establish a favourable environment for encouraging and supporting more women to become leaders in the fishing sector.

# Introduction

## **Poverty in the Philippines**

The Philippines is an archipelago of 7,100 islands off the coast of South-East Asia, with a population of 88 million people. While overall poverty rates have fallen continuously since the early 1980s, very high rates of population growth and the unequal distribution of income mean that over a third of the population live in poor households. Rates of poverty in rural and coastal areas remain particularly high. Wealth and the control of resources remains concentrated in the hands of a few. Natural disasters and conflict are almost constant threats to people's lives and livelihoods, particularly in coastal areas. About 19–20 typhoons hit the country annually, and the series of fault zones that crisscross the archipelago produces an average of five earthquakes per day.

Fishing is one of the country's most important industries, and yet despite this, those working as fishers themselves, or working in fish processing, are amongst the poorest and most marginalised people in Philippine society. Not only are their livelihoods precarious due to the ever-present threat of natural disasters, but they have also been adversely affected by the impacts of trade liberalisation, and have had little opportunity to influence the policies of the Philippine government in this regard. In this context, women working in the fishing industry are doubly marginalised, both by their dependence on such a precarious and exploited means of livelihood, and by their lack of visibility as major economic contributors within the industry.

## **Women in the fishing industry**

Women's contributions to the fishing industry in the Philippines are diverse, but often undervalued and unrecognised. While fishing itself is mainly done by men, some women do fish, and others are engaged in a host of directly linked activities, such as mending nets, boat maintenance, fish-/shrimp-fry collection,<sup>1</sup> and fish farming, as well as processing, packing, and marketing fish once it has been caught. These activities are vital for the survival and operation of the fishing industry, but as they are considered to be extensions of women's social functions or domestic responsibilities rather than income-generating work, they are seldom given economic value, and are frequently overlooked in assessments of the fishing industry and those working in it. This is despite the fact that the income from women's activities makes an important contribution to the well-being of households dependent on fishing. Most of these households are poor, and affected as a result by poor health, poor nutrition, low rates of educational enrolment and attainment, limited income, and low community participation.<sup>2</sup> As such, any efforts to improve the visibility, working conditions, control over resources, and incomes of

<sup>1</sup> **3. Creating the Space to Empower Women Fishers,**  
Women's Leadership & Participation, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB.  
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women fishers are likely to have direct, positive repercussions for poverty alleviation within these communities.

But barriers to women's full participation in coastal resource management persist, not least in women's own acceptance of the gender division of labour prevailing in most coastal communities. Most women believe that men are the head of the family, and should support the family financially, and handle a heavy workload. Women, meanwhile, should attend to all the problems and needs of the family and household. This partly explains why in grassroots organisations in coastal communities, women fishers are largely active working on issues related to their reproductive roles in society. Leadership and decision-making positions on economic issues are dominated by men; when women do take on leadership roles, it is often in less influential positions such as secretary or treasurer – positions traditionally assigned to women because of the view that they pay more attention to detail and are better at budgeting.

That said, things are beginning to change. Effective and sustainable community-based management of coastal resources is acknowledged as an important means of helping to lift fishing communities out of poverty. Within community-based coastal resource management (CBCRM) projects, advocated by Oxfam GB and other non-state actors, women are now recognised as major stakeholders in this management process. As a result, fisherfolk organisations have put in place mechanisms for greater visibility and participation of women in leadership structures. But so far, these initiatives have failed to recognise that women's capacity to assume leadership positions is affected by limits on their mobility, the multiple burden of productive and reproductive work, and gender stereotyping. Women have little time or opportunity to take on management tasks, receive training and information, or establish contacts. There is little support in fisherfolk organisations for raising awareness of women's opinions and needs in this regard. This is because of the imbalance between women and men in leadership structures, and because of limited opportunities for training, and inappropriate approaches to capacity-building for women.

## The Leadership Development Programme for Women

Working with four Oxfam GB partner organisations between March 2005 and December 2007, the Leadership Development Programme for Women (LDPW) was an initiative to identify women leaders in the fishing industry and support them to advocate their specific interests in the overall practice of coastal resource management. The key objectives of the project are:

- to enable women fishers to become effective and influential leaders within the four partner organisations, in recognition of the

fact that women fishers have important skills and experience to bring to such positions, and that having more women in leadership positions will lead to better working conditions and economic outcomes for women fishers;

- to improve gender mainstreaming within these organisations, through assessing the extent to which current organisational structures and processes are responsive to gender issues and concerns;
- to design and support action plans addressing women's needs and interests;
- to encourage men and women within the fishing industry to take responsibility for supporting policies to increase the number of women in positions of leadership; and
- to contribute to greater learning on gender mainstreaming in CBCRM programmes, advocacy, and campaigns.

The LDPW Project consists of four stages: *assessing where we are* (gender audit); *defining our paths to empowerment* (planning); *walking together along the paths to empowerment* (implementation); and *learning and sharing creatively* (assessment process).

### **Stage 1: Assessing where we are (gender audit)**

To begin with, the project analysed the extent to which each partner organisation had succeeded in addressing gender issues in their policies and programmes. This included an assessment of training needs and gaps regarding gender mainstreaming, using participatory rapid appraisal methods to produce information on gender awareness and organisational structure. The results formed the basis for the next stage in the project, i.e. planning activities that would strengthen women's capacities and opportunities for participation and leadership within each organisation.

### **Stage 2: Defining our paths to empowerment (planning)**

At this stage, during four-day gender planning workshops, partner organisations were encouraged to identify gender issues of particular relevance to their area of work, and having done this, to formulate gendered action plans. Workshops also included leadership training. The action plans included developing a better knowledge about laws relating to women's rights and to the fishing industry.

### **Stage 3: Walking together along the paths to empowerment (implementation)**

In this phase of the project, each partner organisation undertook its own, targeted activities, based on the information that they had collected in stage one, and the plans they had drawn up in stage two of the project. The partners' experiences in implementing these activities now follow.

### **Assessing the gender impact of trade liberalisation in fisheries**

The Fisherfolk Movement (Kilusang Mangingisda or KM) coalition was formed in 2001 to unite marginalised fisherfolk in addressing the threats of the Philippine government's policy of trade liberalisation in fisheries, introduced in the early 1990s. The women's committee, the Kababaihan ng Kilusang Mangingisda (KKM), was formed two years later by women representing different fishing organisations, in recognition of the need to mainstream women's concerns into the anti-trade liberalisation agenda.

As part of LDPW, KKM conducted research on the impact of trade liberalisation in fisheries on milkfish fry-gathering. The study revealed that privatising fry hatcheries, which is in line with the government's liberalisation strategy to boost agricultural production, has had a damaging impact on women's livelihoods. Women gatherers of milkfish fry have been displaced from their source of income because fry buyers shifted their demand to private hatchery suppliers. As women's income from fry-gathering is used to finance the education of their children, this in turn is affecting their children's futures. These findings will be used to inform KM's campaign against ongoing trade liberalisation, as well as providing leverage for the women's committee to press for greater involvement of women in decision-making processes within the organisation, on the basis that addressing issues particularly affecting women has benefits for the whole community. For while the women's committee holds one seat on the KM Executive Committee, until 2004 this seat did not have voting privileges, and the Committee remains male-dominated. KM also needs to do much more to nurture women's leadership skills and competencies, and to review its organisational policies to ensure that barriers to women's full representation are addressed.

### **Advancing women's rights in fisheries management and articulating the voice of women fishers in policy reforms**

'Budyong' means conch shell, used in many coastal communities as a horn to make announcements or attract attention. When deciding on a name for their new network, women fishers chose the name Budyong as a symbol of women's voices, and of the need for them to be heard in the fishing industry.

Budyong began life in 2003 as an informal task force to contribute to the gender analysis of the Fisheries Code, introduced in 1998 after ten years of lobbying. Prior to this, women fishers' participation in public debate and lobbying on the Fisheries Code had been minimal. Obstacles to participation included the need to obtain their husband's permission to join activist organisations and to leave the house to take part in activities, as well as a lack of time, as a result of their unending work in the home, caring for children and aged or sick parents. As a result, almost all fisherfolk organisations, from the barangay<sup>3</sup> to municipal and national levels were led by men, so that

women were not well-represented in national consultations on fisheries policy reforms. In addition, development programme work within the fishing sector always targeted men. Generally, women were not considered as a distinct group of workers in the sector, and their interests were subsumed in the dominant development agenda. This was despite the fact that women participated in resource management in their own communities, undertaking vital tasks such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting, and logistics.

The realisation that they as women fishers shared the same experiences of being marginalised was a wake-up call to action for the members of Budyong. Thus, from an informal structure, the women resolved to strengthen their ranks and establish themselves as a network to represent the interests of women fishers from the local to the national level. LDPW paved the way for the formal establishment of the network, which consists of local women's organisations from different fishing municipalities in the Philippines.

Based on the experiences and demands of their members, Budyong has developed an advocacy agenda consisting of:

- recognition of women's priority use rights in fisheries;
- recognition of women as stakeholders in fisheries development;
- security of housing and land tenure for fishing households;
- delivery of comprehensive health care services; and
- advocacy for women's representation in the Local Sectoral Representation (LSR) bill.

Budyong was successful in influencing the Comprehensive National Fisheries Industry Plan, which is the government's draft 20-year plan for the sector, to include provisions to address women fishers' issues. These included carrying out a gender analysis of the current situation in the fishing sector, assessing in particular the as yet unrecognised contribution of women in the domestic fisheries industry. Other provisions related to using gender indicators in data collection, developing and implementing a policy of gender mainstreaming, institutionalising women fishers' participation in policy making bodies, and putting consultative mechanisms in place. In addition, in a dialogue with the National Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Council (NFARMC), Budyong with other women fishers and gender advocates were able to get commitment from NFARMC to ensure that women fishers would be invited to participate during NFARMC meetings, albeit as observers (i.e. without voting power).

### **Responding to violence against women in the community**

On the island of Tabon, Aklan province, Oxfam GB partner Developers provided support to four fisherfolk associations through the LDPW to address violence against women (VAW) in their communities, and to raise awareness of the national 'Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children' (Anti-VAWC) law, passed in 2004.

As part of the gender-audit process carried out at the start of the project, Developers asked men and women in Tabon whether they knew of any cases of VAW. They unanimously responded that VAW was not happening in their community. Subsequently, during training carried out with women from the community, participants were asked to draw their 'river of life', representing all the things that had happened to them since they were born. One by one, women told stories of how they were beaten by their fathers as young children, or saw their mothers being beaten, or that their husbands beat them when drunk. One woman who had left her husband shared how she was made to feel ashamed by other members of the community, because she was now a single mother.

The participants learned that men – their own husbands and fathers – do not have the right to inflict violence on women and their children, and that the law states that violence within a marital relationship should not be dismissed as merely a 'private issue'. Furthermore, they learned that the government and the community have an obligation to protect women and children from any abuse.

The women set out to take what they had learned about the Anti-VAWC law into their community, conducting training on VAW themselves. They persuaded a man who had, in the past, been violent towards his children, to take part in a role play depicting how he had behaved. The father accepted this challenge because after realising years before that what he was doing was not right, he wanted to let other fathers know that they too could change. This alone made a positive impact by raising awareness within the community on VAWC.

Through participating in this training and developing their own skills as leaders and educators, the women have come to realise that there is a clear link between VAW and the general tendency for men to limit women's opportunities to participate in formal organisations outside the home, impacting on their capacity to assume leadership positions. In light of this, along with Developers, the women of Tabon have been steadfast in influencing local development plans to address gender-based violence as a matter of local policy.

### **Mainstreaming gender in an organisational context**

SAMMACA is a fisherfolk organisation, established in 1992 to promote the community's right to manage their coastal resources.

The results of the organisation's gender audit showed that while women were fairly well-represented in positions of leadership, and while the organisation had worked on gender issues since the mid 1990s, the concerns of women working in the industry were not being adequately addressed, and leadership remained very male-orientated. This meant that the development agenda focused on male fishers' concerns, and those considered to be 'major community issues' such as illegal fishing and privatisation of coastal areas, while gender issues, such as women's multiple burden of productive and reproductive work, and violence within the family, remained marginalised. Prior to 2004, women's concerns were not something the male leaders felt they needed to address and act on.

The plan that was developed from this analysis focused on transforming women's and men's attitudes to gender inequality. As part of this, Oxfam GB worked with SAMMACA to make its standard training on leadership more gender-responsive.

One unintended but very positive result of the LDPW was the development of a young generation of gender facilitators and advocates (aged 22-32), who at the time of the project's implementation formed the core of SAMMACA's community organisers. Two young women still serve in the organisation; one was recently elected as general secretary. The recommendations of the gender audit were also considered during the organisation's recent strategic-planning process. As a result, the identification of resources to be managed by women, the development of a gender-responsive education curriculum, and advocacy for the establishment of community-based responses to VAWC have all been included in the strategic plan, paving the way for more women to participate in resource management and to realise their potential as leaders.

#### **Step 4: Learning and sharing creatively (assessment process)**

One tool used to assess the project has been a theatre presentation depicting the reflections and experiences of women participants. This provided a conducive learning atmosphere where women were able to express their views on leadership development and their empowerment in a creative way. The songs and poems developed by the women are now being used in trainings as an aid to the learning process.

## **Lessons learned about developing women's leadership**

### **Developing gender-responsive leadership training**

The LDPW included a specific course of leadership training for women from the four partner organisations. During this, participants discussed whether women and men exercise leadership differently.

The women's views reflected the realities about how women and men are perceived as leaders. Women are seen as 'soft', emotional, and unable to make up their mind (character traits that are considered to make them less effective as leaders), while men are seen as strong, rational, and reliable. On the other hand, women are thought to consider the different aspects of an issue when making a decision more carefully than men, who can be unyielding when they make decisions. These assumptions illustrate the gender biases prevalent in these communities, as the participants came to realise. In addition, the participants recognised that existing opportunities for leadership within their organisations were not the same for the two sexes, with women being confined to less influential roles as secretaries and treasurers, despite their potential capacity to contribute more.

Existing leadership-training modules rarely take gender into consideration as a factor in leadership development, despite it having considerable influence, as the insights from the participants in the LDPW training show. This is why the objective of the training for women leaders was not only to develop women's capacities to lead within their organisations and communities, but also to transform the strategies of leadership development itself, based on the following principles:

- Leadership is exercised not only in positions of authority. Leadership is exercised when parents teach their children the positive values of love, respect, citizenship, and service. Leadership is manifested when people help each other to achieve a common goal, such as reporting illegal fishing activities.
- Women and men are leaders with equal potential to contribute to change in society. But women, as a result of their historical oppression, do not have equal access to positions of power, influence, and decision-making.
- Leadership is a process of dialogue that should be inclusive of and sensitive to the varying levels of marginalisation and inequality in societies, resulting from differences in sex, class, age, ethnicity, and other factors.<sup>4</sup>
- Leadership training should be empowering. It is based on the recognition of the dignity of every individual, and the fact that in each person, woman or man, rich or poor, educated or less educated, lies the potential to be an effective leader.
- Leadership that is empowering embodies the value of participatory governance; decisions are made not by individuals working alone, but by people working together to find solutions to their problems. However, participation can only be meaningful and effective if it is inclusive of everyone, most importantly the marginalised and oppressed.

## **Creating a women-friendly environment for leadership development**

In the fisherfolk movement, most grassroots organisations have more female than male members, but men dominate in leadership positions. Why are women afraid to take on the challenge and responsibility of a leadership position even when it is 'offered' to them? The answers are simple: women do not want to add to their already heavy burden of managing the household and working outside the home; they fear they will have to stretch not only their meagre budget but also their limited time even further; and many are afraid of speaking in a crowd. Therefore, creating an environment favourable for women to develop their leadership skills requires that these factors are taken into account and addressed in the policies of the organisation and their ways of working.

Going through the gender audit enabled the partner organisations to reflect on what stage they had reached in terms of gender mainstreaming, and to identify and analyse the barriers to women's participation in their organisation's activities and leadership structure. The process highlighted the importance of collecting data on the numbers of women who participate in activities, and what kind of tasks they undertake, and of examining the extent to which fisherfolk organisations, through their CBCRM programmes, address specific gender issues, including women's leadership development.

As a result of the gender audit, the organisations involved in this project were able to identify the following as necessary for creating an environment for women's leadership to grow:

- reviewing organisational policies to measure how they explicitly or implicitly marginalise women's concerns;
- integrating a gender perspective into the planning cycle by incorporating specific goals, objectives, indicators, and activities;
- raising men's awareness and support to achieve gender equality;
- sharing the responsibility of gender mainstreaming within the entire leadership structure, and not just with women's committees or gender focal persons;
- providing opportunities for alternative forms of articulation and expression, including the use of visual and performance arts, in programme activities;
- recognising differences *between* women, for instance understanding that older and younger women have different skills and experience to bring to leadership and decision-making, and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and ideas between women of different ages; and
- linking with other women's organisations in the Philippines (this enabled women fishers' concerns to be integrated into the

advocacy agenda of the mainstream women's movement, giving recognition to the specific issues of women fishers as separate but related to issues faced by other women in Philippine society, particularly rural women).

Practical consideration in terms of the physical environment, locality, and timing should also be conducive to learning. This can be achieved by:

- providing a dedicated physical space for women to learn in, as well as to reflect, share their experiences with other women, find relief from their tensions and frustrations, and think about their own well-being and interests;
- ensuring that the training schedule is not in conflict with children's school activities or other community activities where women participate;
- providing child-care services at the training venue;
- scheduling activities in advance so that women can organise their household responsibilities around them; and
- providing a mix of training venues within the community and outside. Activities outside the community can provide relief for women, and allow them to explore places they normally would not be able to visit, but providing activities organised within the community helps to prevent household conflicts by ensuring that women participating in leadership training activities do not have to be away from home very often.

### **Encouraging women leaders to be advocates for gender equality**

The prevailing notion is that traditionally, women who have succeeded in becoming leaders are those who have demonstrated effective communication skills, assertiveness, and the ability to function within the existing status quo. But these 'strong women' do not necessarily adopt an agenda that is favourable to women and other disempowered groups. Therefore, LDPW recognised that it is important to develop women not only as leaders but also as advocates for women's empowerment and gender equality, by encouraging participants to be more gender-aware, and to conduct their own gender analysis. Of course, running gender-sensitivity workshops alone does not equip women with the skills to implement their development agenda. Thus, there is a need gradually to improve women's competencies to translate gender analysis into achievable interventions, such as, in this case, CBCRM research, training, fisheries management, policy advocacy, and livelihoods development.

## Moving forward: recommendations for programme development

The outcomes of the LDPW can be summed up as gaining recognition of two things: the validity and urgency of recognising women's contributions to the fishing sector and its development, and the need to identify and support women leaders within the industry who are able to articulate women's interests, and ensure that they are on the agenda of organisations working in this sector.

On an individual level, these interventions helped women to build their self-confidence, appreciate their own abilities, and realise that they had the potential to assume leadership positions.

From the outset, LDPW recognised that strategies promoting gender equality are central to addressing the pressing challenges women face in attaining positions of economic leadership. Some of the strategies successfully implemented in this project include:

- ensuring women's participation in the entire programme cycle: problem analysis; planning; implementation; evaluation;
- making available resources, particularly human and financial resources, to address gender issues and to encourage more women and men to become advocates for gender equality;
- setting up mechanisms at the organisational and programme level for men and women to discuss, negotiate, and agree on priority gender issues and interventions;
- working with men to increase their awareness of the relevance of gender issues, and to encourage their support for women leaders and gender-mainstreaming initiatives;
- providing spaces for women-only initiatives to enable them to act autonomously in project management, decision-making, and fund management.

Overall, these projects demonstrate that leadership training which addresses gender issues can play a vital role in correcting the imbalances that exist in prevailing economic power structures in society, in this case by highlighting the crucial role that women play in the Philippines fishing industry and in coastal management, and empowering them to participate fully in decision-making. In order to counter these imbalances, and in addition to changing institutional structures and policies, both women and men need to be empowered with the appropriate skills, knowledge, resources, and motivation. If we are to achieve real social transformation, we need to recognise that, given equal opportunities, we all have the power within us to become leaders ourselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A fish 'fry' is a recently hatched fish that can already hunt its own food ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spawn\\_%28biology%29#Fry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spawn_%28biology%29#Fry) last accessed September 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Data gathered from the 12 priority bays under the fisheries sector programme in the early 1990s show that at that time, the average annual income of fishing households was P25,426 (\$509), way below the poverty threshold (Government of the Philippines n.d., draft 'Comprehensive National Fisheries Industry Development Plan', Manila: Government of the Philippines).

<sup>3</sup> The *barangay* is the smallest political unit in the Philippines, consisting of a community of 2,000–5,000 people. It is often referred to as a local village.

<sup>4</sup> M. Afkhami, A. Eisenberg, and H. Vaziri (2001) *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*, Bethesda, Maryland: Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, [www.learningpartnership.org/docs/engltcmanual.pdf](http://www.learningpartnership.org/docs/engltcmanual.pdf) (last accessed November 2007).

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