

## ARTICLE

# Gender Ideology and Manoeuvring Space for Female Fisheries Entrepreneurs

Ragnhild Overa; *Research Review* NS 19.2 (2003) 49-66

This review is by **Chandrika Sharma**, Executive Secretary, ICSF

This article explores how gender ideologies shape the 'maneuvering space' enjoyed by women fish traders in Ghana, a country where fish marketing and trade in the artisanal sector is almost entirely in the hands of women. While the fishery at sea is seen as a male domain, the market ashore is considered female, each domain with its parallel gendered hierarchies. Overa notes that the power balance between the female and the male hierarchies is, however, often asymmetric—while male leaders usually exercise their authority in society as a whole, the authority of female leaders seldom extends beyond women's domains.

Women traders have, in recent years, made inroads into the male-dominated sphere of fishing. Opportunities opened up with the introduction of outboard motors (OBMs) in the artisanal fisheries in the 1960s. Many fish traders found it useful to invest in OBMs given the higher return on investment. While this led to the canoe fisheries becoming more capital-intensive, it also increased the importance of fish traders as creditors. Some of these traders were women, transcending gender norms to enter the sphere of fishing by becoming canoe-owners themselves.

Overa bases her analysis on fieldwork undertaken in three ethnically diverse communities—the Fante of the Moree region, the Ga-Adangbe of the Kpone region and the Anlo-Ewe of the Dzelukope region—characterized by different languages, kinship systems, marriage practices and the socio-economic organization of production systems. The degree to which women 'crossed over' from being fish traders to actually buying equipment and running fishing companies

themselves, varied. Overa found that whereas the Fante women came to occupy a powerful role as investors and owners, the Anlo-Ewe women rarely became owners of canoes and beach seines. Among the Ga-Adangme, it was mostly women in urban areas like Accra and Tema who became owners. She argues that differences in gender ideology could explain these differences. For example, a matrilineal kinship system is observed in Moree, whereas in both Kpone and Dzelukope, patrilineal kinship systems prevail. In Dzelukope, moreover, the pattern of residence is virilocal or patrilocal—the man sets up his own household and the wife moves in with him. In Kpone and Moree, on the other hand, it is duo-local, with women staying in 'women's houses' and men in 'men's houses'.

Overa suggests that the combination of the matrilineal kinship system and the duo-local residence pattern in Moree served to expand women's maneuvering space. Further, the women in Moree were able to solicit the co-operation of their men, since, within the matrilineal system, men stood to gain when female relatives invested in fishing equipment. The women in Kpone and Dzelukope, on the other hand, found it possible to overcome gender barriers only through migration to urban areas. Overa suggests that the degree to which women are able to employ entrepreneurial strategies beyond the female domain largely depends on men's perception of these strategies.

The article is a good example of grounded scholarship that draws on analysis of local gender ideologies to develop a better understanding of factors that influence the space and power that women from fishing communities can 'capture'. In the context of local realities it challenges broadly-held generalizations, for example, that motorization and technological change always adversely affect women. It also provides interesting insights into creative strategies employed by women, portraying them as dynamic actors, constantly strategizing to enhance their spaces—a far cry from the picture of 'women as victims' often portrayed in fisheries literature. ❏



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Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable

fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

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