

## **Stella Williams' IIFET Distinguished Service Award Acceptance Speech**

Thank you very much for the wonderful laudatio on my career achievements. I feel humbled by so much praise by the proposers of the Distinguished Service Award and the endorsement by the IIFET Board. Let me tell you that it did not always feel that grandiose, but in the moments of struggle and happiness about any one of the results achieved, I always felt it was my duty to use the opportunities offered to me to push the boundaries for myself as a scientist, as a teacher and mentor, a mother, as an African woman and citizen of the Blue Planet and to open similar opportunities to the many others working with me, particularly youths and women. Come sunshine or rain, I always felt I was going to push forward. I was blessed connecting with many equally committed individuals and organizations to help make at least some of these dreams and aspirations come true.

One cause particularly close to my heart and research is to better understand, recognize and value the immense work and talent of women in the fisheries and aquaculture in Africa and around the globe. I could see the importance of that in my field research in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa. But I wanted to go beyond case demonstrations that women were capable of going fishing just as men do.

My field research also suggested that there was more to the fisheries than predominantly biological and economic models and stock assessments. In those days, they were considered the key to support management, and they remain important. But I could also see that approaches focused on environmental sustainability alone were faltering wherever I looked. Indeed, the context of massive and mostly still growing aquatic ecosystem degradation raises the question on what it takes to break that downward spiral.

We found the reasons for the degradation initially in the fisheries sector itself e.g. through expansion of high impact gears, overcapitalisation and a focus on fish for export with associated socio-economic challenges. However, in the last decades ocean pollution, dead zones from overfertilization with agricultural run-off and untreated or poorly treated urban waste waters have become significant stressors particularly in semi-enclosed seas and coastal zones with limited water exchange with the open ocean. And as the initial effects of climate change kick in, massive coral bleaching and death are devastating coral reefs and the associated ecosystems in some of the most biodiverse regions of the ocean. Aquaculture, which shows still

high growth rates, has some unsustainable segments and certain types exacerbate ecosystem degradation.

So the questions arose, how were economic and social structures and dynamics affected by the degradation and why did they continue to provoke it?

Could the women in fisheries and aquaculture, so strongly and directly influenced by resource rarefaction, contribute to the much needed transition towards sustainability through restoration of lost productivity and greater social justice? We knew already that economically less endowed women and men rely disproportionately on the productivity of healthy ecosystems. Would we find patterns that allowed us to get insights beyond individual case studies and thus strengthen the scientific underpinning of change strategies?

With Anne-Marie Hochet, a renowned rural sociologist with more than 30 years experience in several African countries, and Cornelia E Nauen, a senior fisheries officer at the International Science and Technology Cooperation Programme of the European Commission, we invited gender specialists in fisheries and aquaculture to a workshop to explore such patterns in Brussels. One of these experts was Chandrika Sharma, the energetic leader of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, who tragically disappeared together with 239 passengers and crew members on board the Malaysian Airways flight 370 in March 2014. For that purpose we analyzed case studies on the role of women particularly in small-scale fisheries from four continents and Oceania. We summarized the findings of our meta-analysis in a report published by the European Commission in four languages (EN, FR, ES, PT):

Empirical evidence of women's roles in all continents shows patterns of unrecognised, unpaid labour that clouds the economic signals of increasing resource rarefaction. Historically, women have been associated with resource conservation embedded in traditional belief systems. These have, however, been progressively eroded. The evidence about contemporary roles of women in the documented fisheries suggested that, although their labour and managerial contribution was often substantial, denial of social recognition kept their contribution largely invisible, unacknowledged and unaccounted for. They were typically active in the postharvest sector, but also in net mending and management of family affairs, while the men were at sea.

The behavioural patterns of women were found remarkably similar across very

different social systems and degrees of economic development of their communities or countries. Extra-efforts expended by women to keep their men in the fishery despite declines in the resource can easily lead to social dumping and unwittingly enables further overfishing. Often, as a last resort to ensure access to food and/or secure some additional income, women go fishing themselves or glean seafood from coastal flats. Such effects have been characterized as 'Malthusian overfishing'. Conversely, women in some Asian countries have been able to increase household food security through managing flood depressions or permanent aquaculture ponds, especially where proper technical, institutional and financial support was provided for them.

Where social recognition is achieved through e.g. enforcement of modern equal opportunity legislation – especially when combined with access to formal education and training as illustrated by case material about the barefoot shellfish gleaners in Galicia, Spain - women regain capabilities for enhanced social organization and leadership. This can lead to significant contributions to restoration of natural resources.

We proposed participatory methods to render women's role visible and enable development of socio-economic organizations supportive of social justice and sustainable resource use. We offered further reading and selected web resources to encourage more systematic engendered research and analyses and help readers to take practical follow-up action.

Nearly 20 years on, the Gender in Fisheries and Aquaculture Group and Symposia convened alongside the annual Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forums and constantly pushed by Meryl Williams and many others allowed for some progress and continues to strengthen the base of social science research. But we do leave lots of opportunities for further research for IIFET and its members to consolidate and develop our economic, social and policy understanding and derived governance advice so as to mainstream this line of research and its findings. The next big challenge is to act and analyze the learning pathways from such alternative ways of doing research and putting its results into practice! To this end, we are delighted to see several strong gender sessions being held at IIFET-2016.

Reaching out to policy makers has also been a key aim of mine, whether to highlight women's role or even simply to get fish and food security on the agenda. When I was a Board member and Vice-Chair of WorldFish Center, Board, we were able to persuade the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) to develop and

implement a comprehensive fisheries agenda that is still ongoing. We are delighted that gender and youth themes were recently added to their fisheries strategy.

Practical actions and education initiatives based on the best available scientific knowledge is what is very dear to me and has been throughout my long professional life. As Vice-President of the international non-profit *Mundus maris* – Sciences and Arts for Sustainability, I am striving, together with all members and sympathizers to ground all activities on these very principles. We also find that action is most robust, when we manage to combine these principles with other epistemologies so long as they are consilient – “jumping together” in the sense used by E.O. Wilson. We have empirical evidence that research can benefit from still available indigenous knowledge – and viceversa of course – and that the way artists make sense of the world can enrich our understanding and willingness to engage by appealing additionally to our emotions, not only to our rational and analytical thinking. We find the interactions most fruitful, when they have broadly shared objectives and are based on mutual respect for the very different methods and approaches. We could see some positive effects of such an integrating framework for producing and promoting teaching aids for the ecosystem approach to fisheries developed with and for the Nansen Programme of the FAO in West Africa. In collaboration with others, we need to develop more continuity and capacity in working with African coastal communities. We dream to help this way to increase ocean literacy by using more engaging approaches to enable them to acquire knowledges that enhance their capacity to act.

In concluding, I wish to express my great appreciation to IIFET - my intellectual home in fisheries and aquaculture over many decades. This is truly a great professional Institute, dedicated to the highest standards in its work and committed to sharing its knowledge with the world.

Please, on my behalf, I want ALL Women and Youths to be recognized and I want that this DSA is for them!