

Women at Work in the Barbados Fishing Industry: Fortunes of a Female Forklift Driver

Mujeres que Trabajan en la Industria Pesquera de Barbados: Vaivenes de una Operadora de Montacargas

Femmes qui Travaillent dans la Filière Pêche à la Barbade: Le Succès d'une Opératrice de Chariot Élévateur

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Documenting Women's Work in the Barbados Fishing Industry

Although women play a central role in the Caribbean fishing industry, their contribution many times goes unnoticed or is not sufficiently documented, if at all. The Gender in Fisheries Team (GIFT), led by the Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (CERMES), at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, is making strides in trying to address this issue. Sharing stories of women's fisheries livelihoods is research being undertaken by GIFT to document and mainstream gender in Caribbean fisheries to assist in the implementation of the 2014 *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (SSF Guidelines). One such story is that of Eutavine Weekes. In July 2018, two members of GIFT and a videographer initiated the documentation of this extraordinary woman's working and domestic life. Hers is the story of a 27-year career working for the Barbados fishing industry, beginning in the late 1980s in a gendered role as the lone female crane and forklift operator with the Ministry of Agriculture at the Bridgetown Fisheries Complex – a job she “enjoyed 120%.” Due to her possession of a tractor licence, she was singled out for the job at the fisheries complex. Eutavine does not come from a traditional fishing family however she had her heart set on working within this industry. The promise of continuous work and steady income drew her to the sector. While she recognized crane and forklift operation was not a typical job for women – at that time no women in Barbados had ventured into this field - she was thrilled to be a trailblazer in the hope that other women would choose to also break the gendered stereotype and follow in her footsteps.

Challenge of a Female Forklift Driver

In spite of increasing gender sensitivity, awareness, equality and equity worldwide in all facets of life, the reality is still that women face workplace challenges, especially when working in what is considered to be a gendered role. It is not strange then to hear or read about the injustices women face in the workplace as a result of gender inequality or stereotyping, but what we seldom hear enough about is when these injustices originate from female colleagues. Eutavine started to work at the Ministry of Agriculture when at the time they were eight males and one female forklift driver – Eutavine was the only female forklift driver in Barbados then. She enjoyed the job and “would go back to forklifting any time” but she was initially surprised that most of the criticism she received on entering her job at the fisheries complex would come from females. While men related well to her, she experienced least acceptance from women who culturally had strong opinions about a woman working in “a man's field.” Her sexual orientation was even questioned by her peers, however she was not deterred by the initial non-acceptance by women in the industry. In time, these same women who tried insult her would eventually come to accept and respect her and the work she did.

Changes Observed in the Fishing Industry Since the 1980s

Eutavine has noticed a few changes in the fishing industry during her years of working within the sector, both in terms of roles of men and women, catch, and production.

Preparing for Retirement

Retirement is a life event most people anticipate with excitement. They look forward to sleeping in until late, having time to do those things they never could when working or chose to do nothing at all and eventually going to the bank to collect a retirement cheque. Fisherfolk are heavily reliant on social security, however with increased cost of living, more and more retirees are seeking ways to generate supplemental income. Although not ready for retirement, Eutavine is putting things in place for when that time comes. Some of the activities she foresees doing to add to her retirement income are scaling and de-boning flyingfish for sale, making fish seasoning with fresh herbs she can grow in her garden for sale and she also trusts that her strong social capital in the form of her children and partner will keep her in good stead in her golden years.

Changes Observed
Women are now giving more value to their postharvest activities, they are demanding better pay stating that activities such as scaling and de-boning fish are arduous and as such they deserve to be better remunerated.
More women between the ages of 35 - 40 are engaging in fish harvest
Young men between 20 - 30 years are now becoming involved in post-harvest activities. There are about 20 men to every 100 women currently involved in processing fish
Fishing today is influenced by recent Sargassum influxes which brings several different species with it
Perceived decline in volumes of fish caught and the catch and commercialization of fish such as amberjack that were never targeted before
Price of fish has double due to the increase in other external cost

Three Little Wishes from Eutavine

Eutavine shared many thoughts on what she would like to see for women in the fishing industry in Barbados; these include:

- i) "I would like to see women doing all types of things that men do, to show the men, that we women can do it all too."
- ii) "I would like to see more women become boat owners and captains of boats...any job a woman can do, she just has to put her mind to it."
- iii) "We have to make women visible in fisheries; look at me. I am a great example and I would like to see more women involved in fishing."

When all is said and done, Eutavine is proud of her experience as a forklift driver; of being a trailblazer within the fisheries sector. For her it was a rewarding experience and career. She reaffirmed that if she had to live life all over again she would go back to the fishing industry – as she has always loved working within the sector and would not have done anything different. For her, it was never an occupation of last resort.

KEYWORDS: GIFT, gender role, Caribbean