

# **Precarity and Informal Social Protection among Women working in the Barbados Fishing Industry**

## **Precariedad y protección social informal entre las mujeres que trabajan en la industria pesquera de Barbados**

## **Précarité et protection sociale informelle chez les femmes travaillant dans l'industrie de la pêche à la Barbade**

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### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The pelagic four-winged flying fish accounts for almost two-thirds of all fish landings in Barbados (Fisheries Division, 2004). In the post-harvest sub-sector, this species is almost exclusively processed by women. A recent reduction in the abundance of flying fish linked to global warming thus had a negative impact on the work of many women fisherfolk. Together with other economic factors, including rising cost of living, this reduction made their livelihoods uncertain and insecure. State-provided social protection was insufficient to shield them from the adverse impacts.

Using a explorative and qualitative research design, I explored how women fisherfolk working in the post-harvest fishing sub-sector in Barbados experienced these challenges, as well as the informal social protection systems - that is, traditional and informal social support systems - available to cope with them. Unstructured interviews with four interlocutors and sporadic participant observation in March and April 2022 provided the main basis of the study, complemented by desk research. The conceptual lens of precarity was chosen to describe the experiences. Precarity was conceptualised as a politically induced condition whereby certain population groups are more affected than others by the failure of political systems to sustain social and economic institutions that are meant to provide a base of life and security (Butler, 2009a; Butler, 2009b).

The interviews showed that the adverse effects of climate change on (flying) fish abundance and marine life made the livelihoods of the interlocutors uncontrollable and unpredictable. Rising consumer and ex-vessel fish prices restricted their mobility and agency. Their agency and resources were further constrained by socio-demographic factors and stigma that made it difficult to find employment outside of the fishing industry. The interlocutors expected care from the state, but inadequate and inaccessible formal social protection schemes tailored to normative livelihood models failed to shield them from the adverse effects of the risks to their livelihoods. It was argued that this failure of state protection is the result of the political marginalisation of fisherfolk due to the relatively small economic value of the fishing industry for the country measured based on the contribution to the GDP. The current state of their worlds was perceived as the new normal within which the interlocutors had to “find ways to survive”. They were worried about their ability to deal with and felt their agency restricted by the uncertainty they faced. They felt somewhat powerless in face of the various factors that determined their precarity. As one interlocutor said: “you never used to worry about it before, and now it has become a reality.”

Informal social protection in form of tangible and intangible resources proved important to deal with the precarity. Kin was one crucial group that provided care and resources to the interlocutors. But also, the interlocutors themselves assumed responsibility to care for their adult children and close relatives, meeting normative expectations on the ‘good’ mother and woman. The interlocutors had different views on whether supporting, sharing, and exchanging among neighbours and friends still existed or were about to disappear. Individualism was not only observed in the fishing industry but in the whole society. It was exacerbated by financial uncertainty because people held on to what they had or could not spare anything, demonstrating how precarity can reduce solidarity. These examples show the limits of informal social protection that are defined by norms and social change, and the extent to which individuals and groups have the agency and resources to care for each other and take action together. However, community work and social gatherings were still considered a source to draw strength and joy from.

The interlocutors thought that cooperation among fisherfolk was vital in order to cope with their precarious situations. They mentioned a lack of inter-personal trust and no belief in the benefit of resource pooling or exchanging as two barriers to collective action. The latter reason was attributed to fisherfolk’s political marginalisation that diminished the belief in the efficacy of collective action. One mutual activity that was still done across the country were meeting turns. As a century-old source of informal contributory insurance, it had survived increasing social fragmentation. It provided an important source to cope with emerging precarity, but was at the same time more difficult to access for those in precarious situations because financial liquidity was a prerequisite.

A quote of one interlocutor summarizes the current situation very well: “What will actually happen - you don't know. It is that you are living day to day. That is how life has become.” How things will develop is to some degree dependent on the social network and the people around oneself as well as the perception and the efficacy of the own agency. Other factors are uncontrollable and unpredictable. In addition, work in the fishing industry is also a way of life that forms identities. It is not a place of employment of last resort. Its deterioration due to climate change might not only have adverse economic effects but also be a threat to the cultural heritage of Barbados and the personal identity of fisherfolk that - as the testimonies of the interlocutors have shown - is strongly linked to the professional life.

The study shed light on the experiences of a population group that is politically and socially more invisible than others. Using an anthropological approach helps to understand how social policies shape the lives of certain population groups, exemplifying the barriers for them to benefit from schemes and the alternative (informal) ways in which they compensate for limited care by the state. Additionally, the study is a contribution to the growing research in form of ‘climate ethnography’, which elucidates the local effects of anthropogenic climate change (Moore, 2015). It shows how culture and nature are relational and climate change is not just an environmental issue. Together with other forces, it contributes to the experience of precarity among population groups that were already marginalized.

KEYWORDS: women fisherfolk, social protection, precarity, climate change, flying fish

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