



The Coastal Resources Center@GSO/Success Story

TRY Oyster Women's Association members vote to uphold terms of their fishery closure in June 2013, maintaining the length and timing of a key element of their use rights and co-management plan.



These women did more than simply TRY

Women's shellfish collective makes history, changes lives

One day in 2007, Fatou Janha stopped to buy oysters from a roadside woman vendor, something Janha had been doing since she was a young child growing up in The Gambia. But this particular day, something struck her for the first time. "I realized that these women were still working under the same conditions, with no improvement in their

livelihood," she recalled. "I wanted to help them."

The arduous work of shellfish harvesting in this tiny West African nation is left to uneducated women in the small villages who eke out a living harvesting, processing and selling this crucial food source. Janha helped them organize, and an initial group of 40 women formed a collective, the TRY Oyster Women's Association. They chose that name because they decided

to join together to "try" to improve their lives and the lives of their families and communities, she said.

Today, that collective has not only "tried" but has succeeded on many fronts. Executive Director Janha is the first to note that TRY could not have made the strides it has without help from the Coastal Resources Center (CRC) at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography. The relationship

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TRY helps create healthy families, healthy ecosystems

started with an unexpected meeting: In 2009 Janha stopped when she saw two Western-looking women speaking with some TRY members, “What do you want; why are you talking to my women,” she asked.

Those women, Virginia Lee and Kathy Castro, were from URI’s CRC and the Department of Fisheries, respectively. They, too, were interested in improving the lives of both local women while protecting the coastal ecosystem. Soon after, CRC began working with TRY as part of a five-year sustainable fisheries project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) West Africa Mission. The relationship proved fruitful, and TRY’s accomplishments are particularly noteworthy given the women’s few means, Janha said. “They are the poorest of the poor in The Gambia,” Janha said.

TRY’s story of empowerment, education and ecosystems gets written anew every day by this once-disenfranchised group of women as they continue to improve their lives. During the fishery closure, from July through February, the women remain busy. They sell peanuts, catfish or other commodities and gather for TRY workshops, where an offer of a meal or a few dollars can be a crucial incentive. Janha tells of one woman who helped with mangrove replanting although pregnant and due to give birth at any time. She simply couldn’t afford to skip the \$5 incentive. Later that night she did deliver her sixth child and named the baby “toutou”, which means “to plant” in her native language.

As the mangroves are taking firm root, so are changes in the women since TRY was founded. They now make decisions that affect their communities, speak with confidence in public, vote



Fatou Janha, executive director of the TRY Oyster Women’s Association, accepts a 2012 United Nations Development Program Equator Prize at the Rio+20 summit.

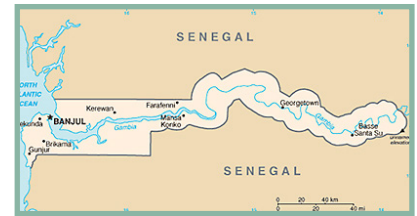
for what they believe in and take charge of their bodies and their health. “They were marginalized women. They didn’t know they could achieve anything by themselves,” Janha said.

Integrating population and health initiatives – on reproductive health, cancer and AIDS – into TRY’s work has also helped empower the women. Janha noted that 80 percent of the 50 members who attended workshops on cervical cancer have since been screened.

“That rate of behavior change at a personal level – education to actual action – is worth applauding,” said Karen Kent, CRC project manager.

The daughters’ of the TRY women are making gains as well. They are being trained in alternate livelihoods so they can earn their own livings with less dependence (and less pressure) on the oyster and mangrove resources.

The women have ideas about how to keep moving forward. Goals include creating a more comprehensive national organization to address gender, health and environment issues and establishing a regional processing plant so it can receive certification to export shellfish which will boost their income and continue to improve their lives.



The Gambia is a long, narrow country surrounded by Senegal

Milestones

- In 2012, the government of The Gambia granted TRY exclusive use rights through a fisheries co-management plan for cockle and oyster grounds in the Tanbi wetlands.
- TRY is the first women’s group in Africa to be granted such rights by a national government, and the importance can’t be overstated. Those rights include responsibility for sustainable management and includes an eight-month closure of the shellfishing grounds to prevent overfishing and to protect mangrove habitats
- TRY won an Equator Prize at the 2012 Rio+20 Summit. More than 125 projects competed for the the United Nations Development program prizes
- TRY membership now numbers more than 500 women (and a few men) in 15 communities
- In June 2013, the women voted to uphold the fishery closure period despite pressure to change the timing and reduce its duration