

Latin America

Networking to support

This is a report of the Latin American Network of Women working in the fisheries sector (NETWIF), which has been active for five years

This article by Helga Josupeit, Fishery Industry Officer, Fish Utilization and Marketing Service FAO, is based on various reports of NETWIF (<http://mujeres.infopesca.org/>)

For the last five years, the Centre for Marketing Information and Advisory Services for Fishery Products in Latin America and the Caribbean (INFOPECSA) has been co-ordinating the Latin American Network of Women working in the fisheries sector (NETWIF).

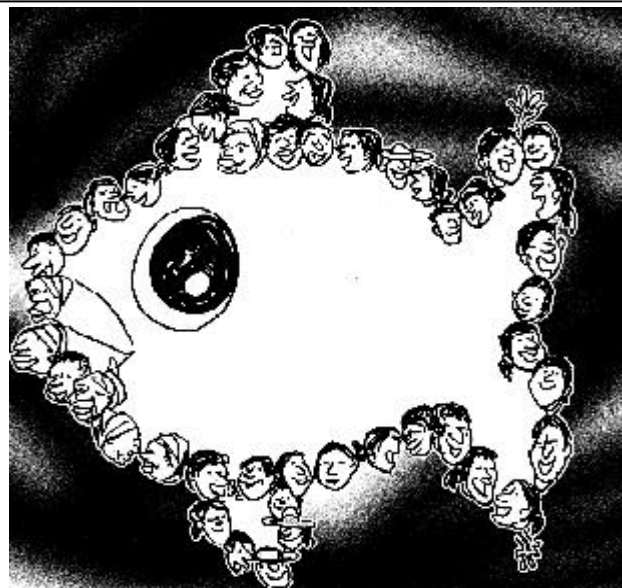
The network now has some 400 members from all the countries of the region. It is open to all women working in the fisheries sector—from those in production, processing and marketing, to those in the university or government.

Two meetings of the Focal Points of NETWIF have been held, in October 2000 and March 2002. In the first meeting held during 5-6 October 2000 in Montevideo, Uruguay, 28 persons from 10 countries of the region—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela—participated. The delegates presented studies on various topics related to women in fisheries and aquaculture.

The meeting observed that women in fisheries were mainly working in the following areas:

Fish factory workers: Main activities of women working in fish factories are: filleting, selection of raw material, classification of species, gutting, heading, labelling, packing and cleaning in general. These are all activities that require meticulous work. In some cases, companies that do not work the year round, maintain the most efficient women in the tasks of cleaning and maintenance. When the season restarts, these women are tasked with supervision and training of new workers.

Self-employed workers: Self-employed workers include wives/ daughters/sisters of fishermen engaged in preparing and selling preserves, fish paste



and cakes, dried, salted and smoked fish, etc. This sector is growing due to the high unemployment in many countries.

Artisanal fisherwomen: These are usually the wives of small-scale fishermen, engaged in skilled and time-consuming jobs onshore, such as net-making and mending, and processing and marketing of catch. Frequently, women and children wade and collect bivalves and seaweed. In general, levels of education and income tend to be low.

Aquaculture: Women in small-scale aquaculture tend to work in feeding and harvesting fish, as well as in processing and selling fish and fish products.

Fishing: It is rare for women to go fishing at sea. It is, however, common to see them engaged in inland fishing in lagoons and rivers, where they use small boats and canoes.

Marketing of fish and fishery products: Women selling their husband's catches is a common sight at landing sites. It is also common to see women selling fish in markets and supermarkets.

Quality assurance and fish and fishery products inspection: Approximately 75 per cent of the professionals carrying out this activity in Latin America are women. Professionally, they are veterinarians, biologists, chemists and food engineers. Moreover, 20 per cent of fish inspectors are women, in general, veterinarians.

Research and development of new products: Women constitute 55 per cent of researchers working

on fisheries in universities. They are generally biologists, veterinarians, chemists, engineers and economists.

Management and administrative activities: There are many women who work as managers, executives, and directors in fishing and fish-processing companies, often in family-owned companies. Women are also found in public administration, working as professionals and secretaries. In some Latin American countries, maybe due to the low salaries, the public fisheries administration is in the hands of women, up to the highest levels. Only the posts of directors are in the hands of men.

The meeting recognized women's important roles in the fishery, as well as the skills they possessed. It also recognized, however, the following problems:

- discrimination in some Latin American countries against indigenous and Afro-American women, particularly in the context of the patriarchal structures in such communities;
- poor diffusion of the laws that have been promulgated in favour of women;
- low self-esteem, and weak and unstable unionization of women workers, as well as little information about family planning;
- occupational health problems faced by women workers in fish plants, linked to high levels of humidity, low temperatures, repetitive movements over a long period of time, and standing for long periods; and
- lack of remuneration of women's work in the artisanal sector, lack of social security coverage, etc.

The meeting stressed the importance of training for Latin American women in fisheries, including on technical topics (technology, handling, preservation, quality control and marketing), social topics (legislation, family planning), and on micro-enterprise development (creation and management of small companies and co-operatives). It was noted that women workers also need childcare support when they are away at work.

The meeting concluded that Latin American governments are not sufficiently aware of the problems of women in fisheries and aquaculture, and

that, as a consequence, they have not invested enough human or financial resources to assist them. Even where investments have been made, they are insufficient. The meeting also noted that, with few exceptions, most Latin American countries do not have statistics or information about the situation of the women in fisheries and aquaculture. Information is particularly lacking on women's participation, needs and expectations. In most countries, moreover, there are few women's organizations, and fishery and aquaculture communities lack good access to credit and co-financing.

Some of the recommendations from the meeting:

- Prepare a study on technical, socioeconomic and micro-enterprise-related aspects of women's needs in fisheries and aquaculture. This study should include qualitative and quantitative information, with the purpose of defining the priorities for action in the countries.
- Formulate an action plan for the medium term, directed towards improving the working conditions, diversification possibilities and the conditions of women in the fishery and aquaculture sector.
- Undertake training activities on specific topics towards capacity building of small-scale 'fisherwomen', aquaculturists, plant workers and wives of fishermen.
- Identify and promote credit lines and other loan systems accessible to women.

The participants committed to:

- consolidate local networks co-ordinated by the focal point of reference in each country;
- disseminate the activities and work already prepared for this First Latin American Meeting of Focal Points, as well as others, useful for the network;
- establish a permanent communication system among the members of the network through e-mail, and to encourage the active participation of all members;
- promote the interest and commitment of the national governments of the region to provide

active support to women in the fishery and aquaculture sector; and

- collect publications, existing legislation, photos and any other document regarding Latin American women, in general, and women of the fishery and aquaculture sector, in particular, in order to build an information centre for the network.

NETWIF's second meeting was organized by INFOPESCA from 18-20 March 2002. It was attended by 41 participants from 13 countries of the region. In addition to the country's focal points, workers from the artisanal sector also participated, voicing their specific needs and concerns. Since the first meeting in 2000, several activities had been initiated, especially in the field of data collection. Participants from Argentina and Uruguay presented studies on the role of women in their fisheries, showing the huge participation of women in the fish-processing industry in both countries.

The second meeting recommended, among other things, surveys to complete the analysis of the situation with regard to women working in fisheries and aquaculture. It also recommended that training activities be undertaken. A holistic approach to training was proposed, to include training aimed at improving fishing methods, processing, marketing, bookkeeping, and credit management.

Some of the following activities that have since been carried out by NETWIF include:

Surveys: The Directorate of Fisheries in Cuba (focal point of NETWIF) carried out a survey on the role of women in fisheries and aquaculture during 2003. The Directorate of Fisheries of Nicaragua (focal point of NETWIF), assisted by INFOPESCA and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Netherlands Partnership Programme, carried out an analysis of the role of women in fisheries and recommended specific training needs.

Training: The 'Livelihood Diversification and Enterprise Development project' of FAO (LDED) carried out three training activities in Colombia (2004-2006), Honduras (2005) and Mexico (2005)

for fisherfolk (mainly women) communities. Training focused on fish processing, distribution, quality problems, marketing, bookkeeping, and small enterprise organization. The focal points of NETWIF in Colombia, Honduras and Mexico were instrumental in organizing and lecturing during the training events, while INFOPESCA and FAO were involved in the preparation of training material and carrying out the courses. These activities resulted in the creation of new enterprises (in Colombia and Honduras) or in the strengthening of already existing associations.

Studies: NETWIF carried out studies on women working in the fisheries industry in the Patagonian region of Argentina, Uruguay and southern Brazil. The studies were carried out in early 2002. The financing of the studies came from small grants of FAO. In 2004, the FAO Fisheries Circular No.992 summarized the main findings of the three studies in English, to more widely disseminate the outcomes of the studies. It was found that in the processing industry, women outnumber men. It was also found that the number of women increased in proportion to the degree of complexity of the processing function. The plant owners consider women as better capable of carrying out more precise tasks. It was generally noted in the studies that a high share of women's salaries is used for the purchase of food for the family and for higher education of the children. Therefore, the creation of jobs in the fish-processing industry could improve food security.

Enterprise development: A women's co-operative in Betume (Brazil) was equipped and trained under the project, "Development of Processing and Marketing of Tilapia Produced in Big Latin American River Basins". One ice machine was installed, the filleting plant was refurbished and the members of the women's co-operative were put into contact with potential buyers in the area. The project resulted in higher incomes for the members of the co-operative, and better infrastructure for the village.

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