



PROFILE

Meet Zoila Bustamente

In Chile, CONAPACH creates history by electing its first woman president

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On 25 November 2007, history was created in Chile when CONAPACH—the Chilean National Confederation of Artisanal Fishermen—elected their first woman President. CONAPACH represents about 60,000 Chilean artisanal fishermen, a sector dominated by men and notorious for its *machismo*.

Zoila Bustamente, the new President of CONAPACH, is a woman fishworker from Chile’s southern Los Lagos Region. The daughter of a shellfish diver, she is no newcomer to fishing. For the last 12 years, Zoila, now 40, has worked as a divers’ assistant, serving as Union

Representative in her local syndicate, El Futuro, in the *caleta* of Estaquilla.

Says Zoila Bustamente: “It does not worry me to work in a man’s world. As kids we began to work at sea. As in all kinds of work, there are good days and bad days.” The new CONAPACH President also declares that she has no political affiliations: “My only allegiance is to the artisanal fishers. Being elected President is amazing, but it will require a lot of work. Trawl fishing and pollution caused by transnational companies are two of our main concerns.”

Meanwhile Zoila continues her work as an artisanal fisher. Every morning she sets out from her *caleta* in search of *loco* (Chilean abalone)

and other shellfish on board the “Marbella”, an outboard motor-powered vessel where she works as divers’ assistant. “If the catch is good we can get home by about two in the afternoon; otherwise, it’s nearly night by the time we get back” she says.

As President of CONAPACH she will have to travel constantly to Valparaíso, the headquarters of the Confederation, taking her away from her husband, a shellfish diver, her 16 year-old daughter, and her father, who two years back had to have his leg amputated.

Sad and tragic events are a part of life for the hundreds of fishers spread out along the coast of Chile. Zoila too has had her share of hardship. She has lost several working companions and once nearly died when her boat capsized off the coast of Valdivia. “We were out in search of *machas* (razor clams) and the boat capsized with a full load, after a bad manoeuvre. We found ourselves under water, and it is only thanks to my father that we got out alive”, she recalls.

Zoila Bustamente’s presidency is in keeping with an upsurge of women leaders throughout Latin America. In this rapidly modernizing region, girls make up for a higher share in school than boys, and women voters outnumber men. Here, women leaders, often perceived as less corrupt, more task-oriented and with a friendlier leadership style, are occupying newly emerging political spaces.

The election of a fisherwoman as President of CONAPACH is a sure sign of change in the male-dominated world of artisanal fishing in Chile and a source of inspiration and courage to women fishworkers around the world. ❧