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ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

“If small-scale fisheries itself is under threat of extinction, particularly as we see in Northern countries, why are we talking about protecting women’s roles in fisheries”, asked one of the participants at the recently-concluded Civil Society Workshop in Bangkok, held from 11 to 13 October, preparatory to the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries, Bangkok, Thailand, 13 to 17 October 2008 (www.4ssf.org). “Let us, instead, talk about saving small-scale fisheries itself, as only if the sub-sector survives, can we talk of protecting women’s roles”.

Many in the workshop, however, were clear that the struggle for recognition of women’s roles in small-scale fisheries is linked to the struggle for defending small-scale fisheries itself. They go hand-in-hand; not one or the other; not one after the other. For, in the gender division of labour that has typically existed in many small-scale fishing communities, it is the men who fish, while women add value to the fish by processing and selling it, bringing the money back to the community. The household and community function as production units, and the wealth from the fisheries comes back to the community.

However, as the nature of the fisheries has changed towards more centralized, technology-intensive and industrial models, women are fast losing their spaces within the fisheries. In several countries of the South, for example, women are losing access to fish, or have access to only low-value fish. Displaced from their earlier roles, they are finding employment in harbours and landing centers, sorting trash fish, peeling shrimp or undertaking similar low-paid jobs.

It is increasingly clear that women’s interests, and those of their communities, are best protected within a small-scale model of fisheries development, while simultaneously addressing inequitable power relations between the genders. It is also clear that protecting women’s spaces in the fisheries is akin to defending small-scale fisheries itself, and to maintaining the viability and wellbeing of fishing communities.

Thus, the consensus Statement from the Civil Society Workshop highlights the need to “protect access of women of fishing communities to fish resources for processing, trading, and food, particularly through protecting the diversified and decentralized nature of small-scale and indigenous fisheries”. The Statement further stresses the need to improve access of women to fish markets, particularly through provision of credit, appropriate technology and infrastructure at landing sites and markets, and to guarantee the rights of fishing communities to basic services. It highlights the need to adopt specific measures to address, strengthen and protect women’s rights to participate fully in all aspects of small-scale fisheries, eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and securing their safety against sexual abuse.

The Statement recognizes that the human rights of fishing communities are indivisible and that the development of responsible and sustainable small-scale and indigenous fisheries is possible only if their political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights are addressed in an integrated manner. It further underlines that all rights and freedoms apply equally to all men and women in fishing communities.

The message from the Civil Society Workshop is powerful and direct. It must be heeded, particularly by our policymakers. **■**



4SSF	2
Chile	3
Profile	5
India	6
Milestones.....	6
AKTEA.....	7
Cambodia	9
Spain.....	10
Q & A.....	11
Yemaya Mama.....	11
Yemaya Recommends.....	12