

Women's future in fishing

This article reflects on the issues and challenges facing women in small-scale fisheries, in the context of the recently-held international conference in Bangkok, where women, however, continued to be under-represented

By **Danièle Le Sauce**
(daniele.le.sauce@wanadoo.fr),
Collectif Pêche et Développement,
France. Translated
from French by
Brian O'Riordan
(briano@scarlet.be),
Secretary,
ICSF Belgium Office

From 13 to 17 October 2008, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, organized an International Conference in Bangkok, Thailand entitled: "Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries: Bringing together responsible fisheries and social development". A preparatory meeting was organized from 11 to 13 October. This was convened by the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP), the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), the Federation of Southern Fisherfolk (FSF), the International NGO/CSO Planning Committee (IPC) and the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). It enabled discussions to take place to prepare the demands for artisanal fishing worldwide.



Given the importance accorded to the role of women in this sector by the FAO and the need to assure their presence and active participation in this conference, it is worth pointing out that women comprised only one quarter of the participants.

We need to reflect on the thirty years of struggles by women from around the world for their representation in organizations engaged with the issue of fishing rights. In the 1990s, ICSF organized the first meetings between women from countries in the North and South

in order to encourage their participation in decision-making processes in the fisheries sector. At Loctudy in October 2000, the two World Fisher Forums decided that in future all their delegations to meetings anywhere in the world would have equal representation of men and women. In this context, we see from the Bangkok meeting that we are clearly still a long way off from that decision of equal representation!

The first issue addressed by the preparatory workshop was "how to recognize and strengthen the role of women?" However, such a discussion is meaningless when women themselves are under-represented in the meeting. The discussion can only move forward when the role of men is challenged in not allowing women to come forward. It can only make sense when we transcend recognition, and move on to concretely discussing the leadership role of women.

There is adequate recognition in the fishing sector that women's work (whether paid or unpaid) in post-harvest activities adds value. They have a direct and equal stake in all engagements on the issue of fishing rights. Men in the sector can no longer be allowed to take all decisions on their behalf.

A theme of one of the working groups at the Conference was on how the economic, social and human rights of women as self-employed, as co-workers, and as community members could be secured.

The working group felt that although we have an ideal framework to guarantee women's rights, putting this into practice is not always possible. Women must get organized and mobilize themselves around important questions and issues. Often a crisis may be used as a springboard (as in the case of France in 1993-1994). Such organization can facilitate recognition by government; and allow women to demand participation in decisionmaking. Having a legal constitution also benefits organizations.

Women's organizations need to have a clear vision/mission and a good understanding of the aims and objectives of their lobbying activities. A strategic approach must be applied to influencing politicians and for using electoral processes to promote women's interests. Women's rights must be placed in a wider context of the roles that women have in communities, and of community needs. Women often require training to enable them play a greater role. In many instances, illiteracy prevents women from

taking up their rights (as in Nepal where female illiteracy stands at 70 per cent). Here NGOs can and do play an important role.

Women's groups need to establish networks, contacts and alliances with organizations in other sectors to share experiences and to identify strategies, for example, in monitoring the application of conventions. Collecting information on the roles of women and the kind of work they do, as well as on their access to, and control over, resources, could provide a way of capacity building and awareness among women to help them demand their rights (as in India). Legal recognition of the rights and role of women in labour is important. But there are few countries that have attained this goal (like in France, the status of collaborating spouse). Women and men must work together to guarantee rights and to change gender relations. Traditional and religious customs may represent serious obstacles in putting commitments into practice at policy level. Use of media may provide an effective strategy for drawing attention to the role of women.

On reading the report of this group, one can see that all the levers for obtaining the objective of affirming the role and place of women are there. However, the leverage is easier spoken about than done. In Europe, the decline of the fisheries sector has provoked a serious de-mobilization of women. Their future is totally dependent on the state of the resources, and on the dynamism of the sector. In the South, women in fishing communities live in poverty, and religion and tradition are large obstacles to their coming out and participating in deciding their future.

The current global crisis shows us how weak our financial system is. Countries have blindly fixed development targets based on economic performance without taking into account social or environmental repercussions. There is an increasing urgency for people, women and children and to look at alternative development models. Such a worldview will also move us closer to discussing forms of fisheries that are more sustainable. ❏

“Women’s rights must be placed in a wider context of the roles that women have in communities, and of community needs.”