

# Q&A

## Interview with Natalia Laiño Lojo, General Secretary of the Galician Association of Women and Men Shellfishers (AGAMAR)

By **Nalini Nayak** (nalininayak@asianetindia.com), a member of Protsahan, an NGO based in Trivandrum, India, and a member of ICSF

### How and why did women shellfish collectors begin to organize in Galicia?

In the early 1990s, some trade union workers noticed the plight of women shellfish collectors. The women were members of the *cofradías* but had no rights as workers. During discussions with them, one woman, Carmen Gallego, realized how disadvantaged they were. She took the initiative to organize the women. The General Workers Union provided the framework and the educational inputs on the need to be recognized as professional workers and then a demand was made. In 1993, they were recognized as workers by the State and this gave them a right to social security and pension. In this way, women from different regions joined the union and AGAMAR was created, and the small fishermen also joined.

### What are the *cofradías*?

These are very old traditional institutions all along the coast of Spain. They function within a certain territory where they also have the rights to use coastal resources. They are composed of the representatives of the different groups in the community who make up the general assembly. From this group, a small group is selected to become the Cabildo or Board at the head of which is the Patron Major. Many decisions regarding the community are made in this general body—a form of local government.

### Do women have a decision-making role in the *cofradías*?

If women represent any particular working group in the area of the *cofradía* then they become members of the general assembly. There have been *cofradías* where women have been Patrons but this is rare.

### What benefits have women shellfish collectors got after creating their union?

Initially, despite the fact that they were recognized as workers, it was hard to get their pensions. They had to make contributions for at least 15 years before retirement. So the older women could not benefit. But when Carmen Gallego entered politics and got elected, she was able to secure a fund which was paid into the pension account and this subsidized the contributions of the women. So this was a big gain. Education has also helped empower the women and they fight for their rights now and also intervene more actively in the *cofradías*. ❏