

Women in fisheries

In the sea of women's concerns

The NGO Forum on Women, held during the Fourth World Conference on Women, in China was a historic event

The NGO Forum on Women, held from 30 August to 8 September 1995, in Huiarou, China, drew nearly 30,000 participants, mostly women. This forum was related to, but independent of, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which was the largest meeting ever convened under UN auspices, with 17,000 persons registering.

It was hardly possible to recognize Huiarou as a Chinese host town for the Forum, since it was overflowing with almost 30,000 women from all corners of the world. Yet, a Chinese host was always to be found when needed for translation, advice on transportation or where to eat, or to solve other problems of the participants and they were always typically friendly and polite.

The town of Huiarou was beautifully dressed up for the occasion, with flowers and banners to welcome the Forum participants. One of the kindergartens of the town was put at the disposal of the children of the participants and the local hospital was turned into an emergency station for the Forum. All in all, the whole town seemed to be at the service of this international event.

More than 3,000 activities were scheduled, with each attracting participants numbering from 30 to 1,500. The activities covered presentations and discussions of all kinds of women's issues, from as diverse fields as the economy and the environment, to spirituality and sexual orientation.

Any individual or group had the opportunity to apply for space and equipment for any activity related to women. Thus, the programme was highly diverse and allowed many groups

with conflicting positions to propagate their activities side by side. Besides the 30,000 workshops, there were rich cultural programmes as well as a general morning assembly focusing on different major global and international women's issues which were scheduled to be further negotiated at the official UN Conference.

Amidst these myriad issues were four of us women a Gambian, two Scandinavians and an Indian all women from fisheries, who had scheduled a workshop entitled 'Women in Fishing: Food Producers of Today and Tomorrow'. We took this initiative on behalf of the women's group in the ICSF with the hope of establishing new contacts as well as to push the issue of women in fisheries on to the agendas of international NGO forums on women.

Clearly, fisheries were not one of the major issues originally proposed for the Forum. Yet, six different groups had scheduled activities in this area. Furthermore, there were plenty of other workshops which would be of interest for women in fisheries, such as presentations on small-scale credit systems, discussions on gender bias in access to natural resources, as well as women's integration or marginalization in rural development.

Overlapping workshops

On the very first day of the Forum, at the very first session, there was an overlap of workshops on fisheries. And immediately afterwards, at the second session, a third fisheries workshop had been scheduled.

We arrived with enthusiasm in Huiarou but just 15 minutes before everything started. So we had to hurry to orient ourselves and locate the venues of the various activities. Anna, the Gambian, and I, one of the Scandinavians, each set

out for one or the other of the overlapping workshops.

The one titled “The Worldwide Crisis in Fisheries and its Impact on Women and the Community’ was arranged by a network of Canadian women, the Nova Scotia Women’s Fishnet.

As we had just arrived at the Forum site and had to familiarize ourselves by getting a map and trying to locate the activities, I was able to make it only towards the close of the workshop. In an open-air tent, around 10 women were discussing excitedly.

After a hurried exchange of addresses, I had to rush for the next workshop, called ‘Women’s Role in Promoting Sustainable Fisheries and Ecosystems’, arranged by the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen. But the conveners never showed up unfortunately, they had not arrived at all.

Anna never made it for her first morning workshop either, which was titled ‘Aquaculture: Food Fish for Growing Populations’. She had to first find the kindergarten to drop off her daughter, Isatou, who, at the age of one and a half, may have been the youngest woman at the Forum.

Unfortunately, that was neither the first nor the last time we showed up at events

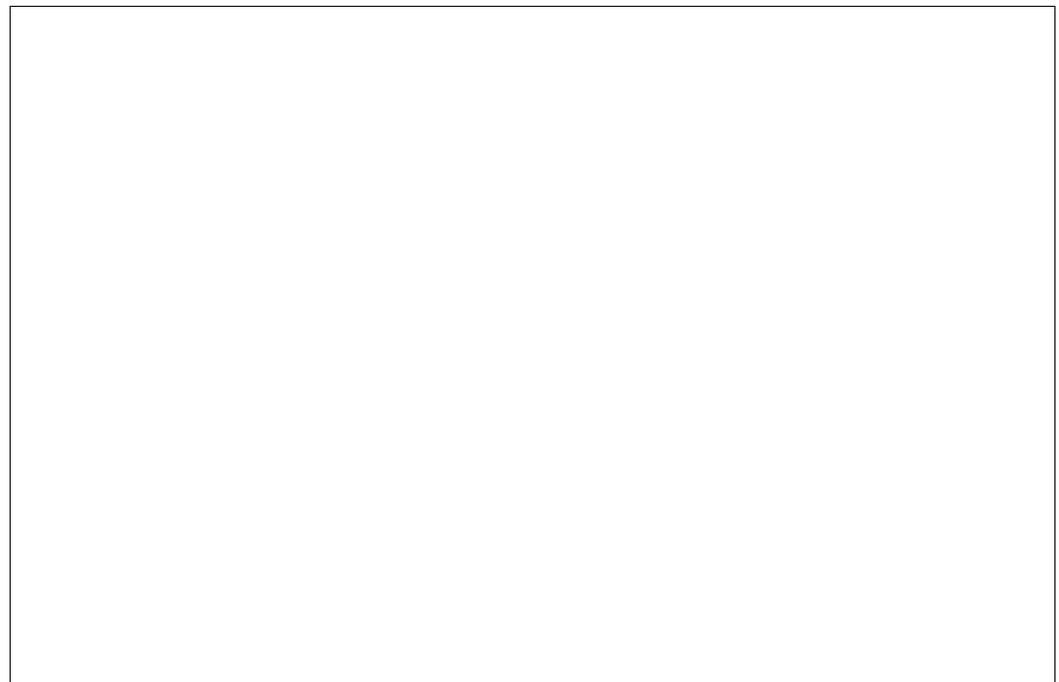
which had been cancelled or changed. In such a huge forum, where there was no centralized control, all the conveners of the different activities were themselves responsible for reporting changes, to be printed in the daily Forum newspaper.

Yet, precisely due to its decentralized and open nature and the great number of overlapping activities, the Forum was a challenging event. One had to participate fully in whatever event one found oneself in and not worry too much about whether something going on elsewhere could be more relevant. Since several women’s issues are interlinked and are equally important for women in fisheries, this was not a truly huge problem.

After the first day, the rest of the fisheries workshops were convened as planned. This allowed us to participate in them fully. The most active group in the fisheries field was the Women’s Economic Network of Newfoundland, which held two workshops and staged a cultural event of songs and poetry.

Personal experiences

The workshops were called ‘Women’s Role in Fisheries in Newfoundland’ and ‘Women Healing Oceans’. In the first of these, the women narrated personal experiences of how the fisheries crisis had affected their lives. In the second, they highlighted how a new respect for the life of the sea had to take over and needed to



be developed, if there were to be a future for their communities.

Finally, the Women and Fisheries Network from Fiji held a workshop on 'Women in Fisheries Development with Special Reference to South Pacific Islands'. One of their objectives was to develop small-scale aquaculture and subsistence harvesting of marine resources for local needs, as opposed to the development efforts based on foreign capital and great industrialization projects.

In essence, what really happened at the Forum was that several networks of women in fisheries were formed without any prior contacts whatsoever. It was promising to get to know about these local and regional activities. All were characterized by the breaking of traditional borders.

No network or group divided women interested in fisheries into subgroups. It was not the trade union interests of women in fish processing, or the market prospects for fish-selling women, or the intellectual games of academics, that made up the groups of women.

Rather, women concerned about sustainable fisheries and their livelihoods found themselves in the same network, whether they were primary producers, wives of fishermen or academics from women's or fisheries research groups. Perhaps this is the women's way of organizing.

The environmental contexts, and the importance of fish production for local consumption and needs, were common concerns. The attention of the women seemed to be concentrated here. This may well be one conclusion that could be drawn from this international gathering. I believe it was the huge size of the Forum and the overwhelming amount of activities that effectively frustrated any one group from taking the initiative to establish a get-together, on the spot, of all women-in-fisheries organizations.

We also missed the organizational experience of Aleyamma Vijayan from the ICSF Women in Fisheries Programme, who, at the last minute, was

unfortunately hindered from participating. At any rate, the door has been thrown open for future contacts. Those that were already established at the Forum show a possibility for common preparations for the future. To establish shared goals or strategies was not the agenda of the networks at the Forum. Rather, it was to exchange and participate in one another's experiences. In any case, local activities seem to be at the core of efforts to change fisheries as well as women's positions in fisheries.

Until this Fourth World Conference on Women, women's role in fisheries remained invisible in international documents on women's politics. As at other UN conferences, preparatory committees had been already negotiating the final document to be adopted at the conference.

The issue of women in fisheries was highlighted at the preparatory committee in New York in March 1995. The past invisibility of the importance of fisheries as a women's issue has not been due to ill will, but rather due to the lack of promoters for the issue. When Norway raised it as an issue to be included along with agriculture, it was adopted without any resistance.

New recognition

In the official UN Conference's Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, women's role and needs in the fisheries sector now find mention as part of the strategic objectives. The chapters on poverty, environment and colonies recommend that the needs and efforts of women be addressed. The entry of fisherwomen into the arena of international women's politics is now a fact. It is up to us to contribute to, and make use of, this arena in the future. ♣

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