

Q & A

Following the Fisherwomen's Convention on Livelihood Rights, organized by Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) in July 2012, Mustafa Gurgaze (mustafagurgaze@pff.org.pk) of PFF, spoke to the PFF Senior Vice Chairperson, Tahira Ali Shah

Why was the Convention on Livelihood Rights organized and what did it achieve?

The meeting was organized to focus on the basic human rights of fisherfolk and the specific rights of Pakistan's fisherwomen who have been in the forefront of the struggle for the collective rights of fisherfolk in the State. It provided a refreshing break for fisherwomen and an opportunity to meet each other and to learn about their rights.

What is the role of women, particularly fisherwomen, in Pakistan?

Fisherwomen have always worked side-by-side with fishermen. They sometimes even go fishing alone and sell the catch in the markets. Fisherwomen want to participate in all walks of life and to make their own identity. But there is religious extremism in our society, which started under General Zia's regime and continues to impact some of our laws and practices—the rape law and *karo kari* (honour killing), for example—depriving women of their basic rights. In the tribal areas, women are treated as second-class citizens. Recently, the government has introduced some laws which protect women. We are expecting a brighter future for women in Pakistani society and hope that soon they will enjoy equal rights.

What are the issues that fisherwomen in Pakistan face?

Earlier, fish was abundant and easily accessible. Today, because of industrial pollution and other reasons, fishing, in both sea and the Indus Delta, is no more a well-paying profession. The entry of external communities—Bengalis, Beharis and Pakhtoons—in fishing is further depleting fish resources. Fisherwomen are forced to take up work in fish-processing industries. The conditions of work in these factories are unhygienic and harsh, affecting pregnant women very badly. In addition, wages are low. Many women are taking up work in other industries such as the garment industry.

How are fisherwomen in Pakistan organized?

PFF is a social movement in which the fisher community is linked together through units. Some units are only for men; some for women; some for both. The office bearers in some joint units are women. PFF is focusing on gender mainstreaming and has increased women's membership from 22 to 34 per cent in the last three years.

What are your goals and future plans?

Literacy, awareness and equality for women. Also, we want women to be at the forefront of struggles for human rights and sustainable livelihoods and against the depletion of fish resources, environmental degradation, and the destruction of the Indus Delta. We want legislation against *jirga* (assemblies of tribal elders) and an end to unjust laws like *karo kari* and other forms of violence against women. ❏