



27 Years in Support of  
Small-scale Fishworkers

# Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

## From the Editor

Whether in South Africa, Chile, Uganda or India, as this issue of *Yemaya* shows, women in the small-scale and artisanal fisheries are confronting growing challenges in their daily lives. Caught between bureaucratic governments and exploitative markets, on the one hand, and male-dominated fisheries associations and violent neighbourhoods and homes, on the other, for most women in the sector, life can be a hellish struggle. While women usually cope by drawing upon inner strength or turning to one another for help, if in the sector as a whole, women are to ever gain justice and their rightful place in society, much more is needed.

Everywhere, women in the fisheries are demanding the right to work and livelihood; for an end to the invisibility of their labour; for just wages; for access to credit and to basic services and facilities; for communities and homes where no woman is raped or beaten and no child too poor to go to school; for a proper voice in the governance of the sector and the societies they live in. They are aware that no community can progress or become truly democratic unless, within it, women can participate as equal citizens.

However, when women do get together with their demands, often they report coming up against a wall of opposition. They find that their systems of local governance are based on the exclusion of women; that local land ownership and resource control is vested with men; men dominate fisheries associations and unions and are unwilling to relinquish their stranglehold over power; when women are allowed to become leaders, they find that the real reins of power are often in the grip of male hands; they even discover that projects for the empowerment of women can get away, for a length of time, by recruiting male fishers instead.

From violent homes to hidebound structures of patriarchal decision-making, there is thus no place that offers real sanctuary or justice to women in the fisheries sector. As the pages of *Yemaya* testify, meetings and conferences, therefore, become spaces for women to gain relief through the sharing of experiences. While such sharing is important and welcome, even more necessary is perhaps having an analytical framework to help make sense of these experiences so that women no longer see them as normal occurrences that are part of the natural order of being female but for what they in fact are: daily violations of their rights. Feminism provides such a framework.

Despite the denigration of feminism, in the popular media and in the jokes casually traded by men, feminism is the “radical notion that women are people”, and so, have equal rights. When women embrace such a belief, they embrace their own humanity and build a bridge of solidarity with other women based on the common set of experiences that gender imposes. The challenge for women in the fisheries is, therefore, to occupy feminism, to refuse to let it be trivialized and taken over by those who benefit from the unjust and unequal distribution of power, to advance a feminist analysis of fisheries and to fill it with the colour and substance of their own lives! ❏



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