



**28** Years in Support of  
Small-scale Fishworkers

# Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

## From the Editor

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines, hereafter referred to as the Guidelines) are expected to be finalized in the upcoming Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting in June 2014 in Rome. Currently under discussion, these guidelines represent a step towards the formal recognition both of women's contributions to the small-scale fisheries as well as of some of the major issues of life and livelihood that they face. However, while the inclusion of gender concerns—the result of sustained lobbying by a large number of civil society organizations—is certainly a laudable outcome, the final document may be something of a mixed bag for women in the sector.

The Guidelines recognise women's critical contributions to pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest activities in the freshwater and marine small-scale fisheries, including shellfish and seaweed. They further recognise that gender equity and equality are fundamental to the development process and so also equal rights and opportunities for women. Calling for the promotion of women's leadership, the Guidelines invoke the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in calling for the elimination of gender-prejudicial customary practices. Gender-sensitive policy making, women's participation in fisheries organizations and equal access to extension services and technical training are among some of its further recommendations.

However, there are several fundamental problems with the Guidelines with respect to women. Not only are the Guidelines voluntary and non-binding in nature, they also do not cover aquaculture, the fastest-growing among the animal food producing sectors and one that employs or engages vast numbers of women. Apart from these inherent infirmities, the Guidelines further also trivialise the systemic and structural nature of the multiple problems that women in the sector face, including economic, social and political marginalization, first by reducing these, in its chapter on Gender Equality, to a matter to roles and relationships among men and women, and next, by erasing the specificity of women's issues altogether with the claim that women are only "often more disadvantaged than men". Having so framed the problem, it is hardly surprising that the solutions the Guidelines offer are all in the realm of "empowering women".

Beyond perhaps presenting a window of opportunity for certain sections within the small-scale fisheries, how effectively might the Guidelines help women challenge, in any meaningful manner, the gender status quo in the sector would therefore be a moot question. The real transformation of gender inequities and the discrimination experienced by women in fisheries will only be possible if the stated human rights basis of the Guidelines is given effect through specific measures in an Implementation Plan aimed at tackling the systemic basis of such inequities at household, community and in public life. ❏



Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary, ICSF and Publisher, Yemaya, was on board the Malaysian Airlines MH370 that disappeared on 8 March 2014 en route to Beijing, China from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Chandrika was on her way to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, to attend the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, representing ICSF. The location of the aircraft is, to date, not known. Chandrika is very much missed by all of us. Along with anxious friends and members of her family, we still remain in hope for her safe return.

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