



Every morning Helan Jasitha Fernando gets up at 2 am and walks five kilometres from her home to her fishing hut. Dressed appropriately for fishing, she puts all her equipment into her canoe and uses her bamboo paddle to propel herself and her vessel around seven kilometres out to sea, off Talaimannar beach on the northern coast of Sri Lanka. There she joins the men who are already working, to catch prawn, shark, sardine and yellow fin tuna.

Fernando, who is 69, has been doing this job since three months after her husband died in 1999.

## PROFILE

### Breaking boundaries: A 69-year-old Talaimannar fisherwoman breaks social boundaries

By **Daya Neththasinha**,  
Courtesy:  
<http://thecatamaran.org/2016/07/25/the-69-year-old-talaimannar-fisherwoman-breaking-social-boundaries>

“I was born in Ulhitiyawa, Wennappuwa, and my husband was from Katuneriya,” she explains. “We married in 1968 but our families objected to our marriage. One day my husband went home and all of his clothes had been thrown out of the window and the door was locked to him. I went home and all my clothes had been burned. So, in 1970, we came to Talaimannar with just the clothes on our backs,” says Fernando.

Both Fernando and her husband are Sinhalese but they managed to make a new life among the Tamil people in the north of the island nation. “The sea here saved us! By 1990, we had two boats, 13 smaller boats, a cart and around a hundred nets. We also had a herd of goats.”

But then the civil war started and the couple and their family were forced to move. They had to leave everything behind and returned to Wennappuwa.

“We left there with nothing,” Fernando sighs, “and we went back with nothing.”

In 1999, Fernando’s husband passed away suddenly, leaving their six children in her sole care. So, despite the fact that she had never been fishing and did not know how to swim, she took to sea in a boat her husband

once used and went to catch food for her family.

“On my very first day I came home with a net filled with 600 rupees’ worth of fish,” Fernando says. “That was a lot of money in those days.”

Was she frightened?

Fernando says she had no choice. “There was nobody to give us any help. My husband’s rafter and my confidence were all I had left.”

“Navy officers used to stop and ask me what I was doing out there,” Fernando says smiling. “I would always tell them I was just there to do my job. Young men used to tease me. One time my rafter capsized and people came to save me.”

Fernando says she catches fish every day although sometimes it is worth LKR 3,000 (around US\$ 21) and other days only LKR 500 (around US\$ 3). She says she is certainly no longer worried about going out to sea at night.

“What would I have to be afraid of? I have walked these sands for so long. I know the sea and I know everyone in this area. I can speak Sinhala and Tamil. No man my age goes fishing the way I do and people love me for it,” she explains.

Despite the fact that her six children are all adults now and have their own jobs, Fernando wants to keep working. She has a very particular reason for this. “I have a seventh child now,” she explains.

Around 13 years ago one of her co-workers died. On his deathbed he asked her to promise to take care of his new-born son. The baby’s mother also wanted this, so Fernando adopted the boy. He started respectfully calling her *nonama*, the name by which she is now known all around the beach.

Fernando continues to pay for the boy’s schooling and upkeep. As this courageous woman, who fights the tides and the weather daily, says: “I will not beg from anyone when I am still strong enough to earn a living. So I will continue to go fishing until he is old enough to earn his own money.”

Visit the site to see a film on Fernando (<http://thecatamaran.org/2016/07/25/the-69-year-old-talaimannar-fisherwoman-breaking-social-boundaries>). 📺