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Questioning invisibility

Women workers in the fisheries sector in Chile are often not formally recognized or covered by social security

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As part of a research project, 1,571 interviews were undertaken with women who work in artisanal fisheries and aquaculture activities in 10 councils of Chiloe Province, in southern Chile, between November 2004 and February 2005. The aim was to obtain information about their activities, age profile, income and education levels, professional recognition, and future expectations.

There are 80 fish landing centres in Chiloe Province that are recognized by the government via Decree 240/1998. All these were visited for the research project. In addition, information was collected from 74 other places where women engage in fisheries and aquaculture activities.

For some years now, the invisibility of women's labour in artisanal fisheries has been a matter of reflection and research in several countries where fishing has been a traditional activity. In Chile, the existence of native groups living in coastal areas has been recognized from pre-Hispanic times, and women have been working along rivers and estuaries, maintaining a direct relationship with fishery activities and collection of seaweed and shellfish, abundantly available in their immediate environment.

As a first step towards looking at the activities of women in fisheries, the Undersecretariat for Fisheries in Chile felt it necessary to quantify the work, both formal and informal, of women in artisanal fisheries and aquaculture.

Towards this end, it initiated a project named "Quantification of the Formal and Informal Activities of Women in Artisanal Fisheries in Chiloe Province, X Region, Chile". This project, funded by the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA), was

executed by Prisma Consultants between November 2004 and February 2005.

Chiloe Province was selected because of the high concentration (35 per cent) of artisanal fishermen and divers in this region (Region X), equivalent to 33 per cent of the total artisanal fisheries workforce engaged in extractive activities in Chile (National Statistics Institute, 2002).

This research was the first of its kind at the regional and provincial levels. 1,571 personal interviews were undertaken in the 10 councils of Chiloe Province, as follows: Ancud (536), Quemchi (68), Dalcahue (34), Curaco de Velez (111), Quinchao (346), Chonchi (70), Puqueldon (71), Castro (72), Queilen (42) and Quellon (221).

The results showed that the principal activity of women is the collection of shellfish and algae along the coast, with 88.2 per cent women reporting themselves to be engaged in such activities. Children, teenagers and old persons were also found engaging in these activities. Additionally, about four per cent women were found to work as *desconchadoras* (workers engaged in de-shelling the shellfish), while two per cent did actual fishing.

According to the General Fishery and Aquaculture Law (Decree 430/1991), some categories of labour must be recorded in a national registry. The research found that most women work 'illegally' as their activities are not registered in the National Artisanal



Fisherwomen's Register or in the National Aquaculture Register.

The incomes of these women were seen to be low at about US\$ 86 per month. A high percentage (69 per cent) declared no coverage under social security. As for the age profile of women in the sector, about 45 per cent of the women interviewed were between 20 and 40 years of age, another 45 per cent were older than that, and about 7 per cent younger than 20 years. Ninety-five per cent of the women interviewed had received some education—19 per cent had completed primary school and six per cent, high school.

The project is the first institutional effort to recognize and valorize women's participation in fishery and aquaculture activities at the national level. The main outcome expected from the project is the formal recognition of the fishing activities performed by the women in Chiloé Province, and their registration in existing records, so that their productive activities gain official recognition. It is also worth remembering that most of the funds earmarked for the artisanal fisheries sector are granted to formally constituted organizations.

The co-operation of the women interviewed for the research project indicates their yearning for a better quality of life and for changes that can ultimately lead to greater recognition of women's work.

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