

South America/ Chile

My life is the sea

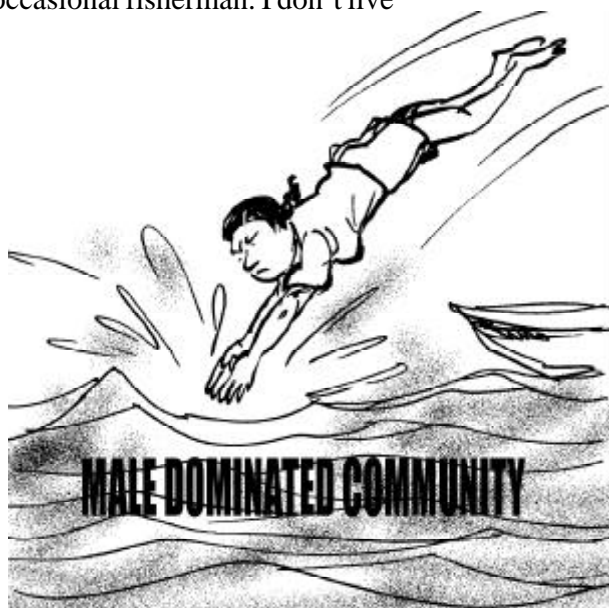
This brief profile of a fisherwoman from Chile is taken from the book 'Mujeres de la Pesca Artesanal, relatos e imágenes de mujeres de la V región' (Women and artisanal fishing: stories and pictures of women from Region V).

by Francesca Mariana, an anthropologist who works with CEDIPAC, an NGO associated with CONAPACH, the national fishworker organization in Chile.

There are five children in my family, four girls and one boy. My father wanted two boys to go fishing with, but the second one never came. So of the four girls, he selected one to be trained to fish—and that was me. And I'm certainly not complaining about that.

I've been going to sea since I was six, but actively since the age of 12. When I was a child, the three of us—my brother, my father and I—would always work together. When my mother found out that I had chosen this profession, she cried, saying that having three family members to worry about was a lot.

I am 38 years old and have a son of 14. He is doing his first year at secondary school (*primero medio*). I don't want him to become a fisherman, not because I don't respect the work a fisherman does, but because there are many sacrifices to make, and there are good times and bad times. I am not married, I never got married. The father of my son lives in Loncura. He is an occasional fisherman. I don't live



with him.

When my son was six months old, a tiny tot, I took him me whilst we were away, but my mother told me, "No, because you are breastfeeding, you can't go". So I went for two or three months without going to sea. Later I used to leave the milk under the pillow in a bottle wrapped in a cloth, and my mother would feed my son whenever he demanded milk.

I'm also a sandwich maker in the *Fuente de Soda* (soda fountain) that belongs to my aunt, where I work every day in the summer, starting five years ago. I get up almost every day between two and three, change my clothes, wait for my brother to get up and together we go fishing. After returning from the sea, we sell our fish and when I get home, I sleep for a while, from 11 am till 4 in the afternoon, and return to the *Fuente de Soda*. In summer, when I have both jobs, I have the most work.

There are some fishermen who think that a woman in a boat brings bad luck. But I am personally known in the fishing villages of Cartagena, La Salina de Puhaiy, Papudo and Los Molles, having worked with my father for many years. We would camp for three months in Las Salinas de Puhaiy and for five months in Cartagena.

Apart from collecting razor clams and fishing, I also dive, though I don't have a licence. I have not been diving much recently after having nearly punctured my ears. I also suffer from painful menstrual periods, and have to take to bed often. I don't dive around here any more, but it's fantastic under the water and when I go diving, time flies and you'll have to come and search for me...

When the water is turbid, you don't see very much, but when it is clear, it's beautiful. Everything that is on land you find under the water; there are little bushes, coloured green, blue and purple, which disappear when you go to pick them. I used to play around a lot with these plants when I first started to dive, which was when I was 15 years old. My father taught me to dive in Las Salinas de Puhaiy. I used to dive wearing only shorts and a t-shirt, with a plastic cap on my head because when the water is freezing, it really hurts your head. Once I took up the challenge of a local fisherman, who said, "I bet you won't go diving in mid-winter." He was wearing a diving suit and I only had my usual clothes. I plunged in, but he didn't.

Until a few years ago, I was the only woman fisher

with a licence, but it cost me dearly to get it. The local harbour master at the time provided a letter requesting that I be given an artisanal fishing licence so that I could go out to work without any problems. The first application was rejected, since it came from a woman. Following that, the harbour master and I went to talk personally to the navy captain. He told me that it was not possible to grant a licence. When I asked why, he said, "Because you are a woman". That made me really angry. "So being a woman is an impediment to working?" I asked furiously and told him off for discriminating against women. He finally gave me a licence. But later we failed to get it renewed.

My mother always told me, "Fish only until you are 40 or 45, at the latest, no more, because afterwards you will have problems with your bones, due to the cold." But the truth is that I hardly know how to do anything else. I have a licence to handle foodstuff, to get which I had to do a course. It was my aunt who asked me to do it so as to have an alternative source of livelihood, for when it is no longer possible to work at sea. But the truth is that my life is the sea.

I also like to experience new fisheries and new challenges. I have even been after albacore, out in the deep sea. I respect the sea, but I am terrified of fog. Once a ship nearly hit us, right here, inside the bay. Another time, the fog made us nearly capsize on the rocks. That's why I am really scared of the fog.

I'm also scared of the wind, but not so much, because inshore, the sea is different. You know that if you capsize, you can swim for a while to reach shore. But you know that if you capsize offshore, you will go on swimming until you get hypothermia. There are many fishermen, workmates, who have died at sea, leaving behind just an urn, clothes and a photo for their families to remember. I wouldn't want that to happen to my son.

Once, in Quintero, a fisherman went missing for three years. His boat capsized and some fishermen in a boat found his body three years later. They recognized him because his identification documents were intact in a nylon purse. There was a second funeral and the family had to experience grief all over again. In such cases, until the body is actually found, there is always hope that the person is alive somewhere, that he could have gone north or south, that he could have been picked up by a boat...A thousand possibilities are

offered, but rarely do people immediately believe that the lost person is at the bottom of the sea.

We believe that the sea is female, so when things are going well for us we say to it: "OK, Maria, don't give us too much fish because later you'll make us pay for it, and you'll probably abandon us out here, so that's enough..."

This excerpt is from the book *Mujeres de la Pesca Artesanal, relatos e imágenes de mujeres de la V región* that was published in Chile in 2001 thanks to support from the Art and Culture Development Fund of the Ministry of Education.

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