

Feeling insecure

Women workers in Chile's fish processing factories face bad working conditions and an insecure future

The Chilean fisheries sector provides large quantities of marine products for export. This has enabled it to establish a very effective and dynamic place for itself in international trade and given it a very important role in the national economy.

Its efficient growth and expansion, particularly in the last ten years, are shown by several macroeconomic indicators: the volumes produced and exported, foreign exchange generated levels of investment, increased productive capacity, increased job opportunities.

However, these positive trends in growth and expansion hide the social processes associated with export-oriented production, where social imbalances, inequities and exclusion form an integral part.

In order to analyze and explain these issues, we have focused on the main aspects of the working conditions and quality of jobs in the sector, with particular emphasis on the section of workers from the plants processing fish for human consumption (canned and frozen products).

It is particularly important to note that the growth and expansion of the overall sector, while producing a considerable expansion of the job market, has produced jobs that are extremely insecure in nature.

They are characterized by: insecure tenure; informal contractual relationships; subnormal salaries; a bad working environment; lack of access to health or pension schemes; negligent working arrangements; and barriers to forming unions for collective bargaining. So, although there are many more workplaces available, they are not

associated with any improvements in the well-being of the workers.

It has been calculated that women represent nearly 50 per cent of the full-time workers in the sector, and in some parts of the production chain this percentage can rise to as high as 80 per cent. Some incomplete national-level statistics, which only include production units employing ten or more persons, show that there are around 10,000 full-time women workers. To this one must add an unknown number of part-time workers who can only gain employment according to production demands.

As well as being strongly biased towards employing women, the job market in the fishing industry has a marked division of labour by gender. Particular tasks are only allocated to men and others only to women. There is a tendency for the latter to be more short-term and insecure, and this is caused as much by cultural factors as by structural and economic ones.

The workers in this kind of industry are generally drawn from lower socioeconomic classes, have inadequate education and qualifications, large numbers of children, and are frequently women heads of households (i.e. the sole earner and provider).

Specific roles

They are usually best at undertaking tasks which involve handling raw material and, as a result, are assigned specific roles in the production process, including working in a production line with both unprocessed and finished products. They are able to undertake highly skilled manual tasks, which require the development of special abilities. But as these tasks are also very routine ones, they

pay low salaries and offer poor job security.

In terms of numbers and turnover of workers, it is the small-scale and low-technology enterprise sector that mainly employs part-time workers for fish processing. The processing of perishable products without access to cold-chain infrastructure, for example, obliges them to recruit this kind of manual labour.

While the job market in the fisheries sector is flexible, there are structural aspects which make the demand for manual labour vary over the year. Above all, adjustments must be made to take into account seasonal peaks and troughs in catches and production. It is also important to point out that the flexible numbers of male and female workers allows employers to evade the responsibilities and costs required in contracting a full-time workforce.

This makes possible subcontracting of workers, working out of home, and short-term contracts. This latter arrangement forms a central part of the economic strategy and commercial organization in fish processing plants.

Within the workforce there is a high turnover rate, where a large reserve of people cyclically enter and re-enter the job market, increasing the supply of

cheap labour, thus forcing salaries down. The fishing industry also uses a system of variable salary rates, designed to avoid any salary indexation, any payment of minimum wages or other employment-related responsibilities. Any increase in pay rates is almost exclusively linked to productivity, and such payments are mainly conditional on productivity and profitability performances. The working days are long, with irregular hours, and are subject to variations according to the weather, season, volume and time of fish landings, and the time of deliveries and sales.

Processing plants are characterized by a combination of significant risk factors, and the more insecure the job, the greater these are. They are related to the technical nature of the work, and associated with damage to health.

The poor quality of the jobs is also revealed by the lack of opportunities for access and use of social security and pension schemes. The irregular working periods mean that the workers' benefits are interrupted, so that they have to fall back on the public health system, pleading poverty or dependency.

Intermittent work

As for pensions, considering the intermittent nature of the work and the low and unstable incomes, it is unlikely that the workers will be able to build up

sufficient individual funds to acquire a future pension adequate for their old age.

As far as labour laws are concerned, there are particular provisions that prevent part-time women and men workers from organizing themselves into unions and collectively bargaining for better working conditions. This increases their vulnerability and reduces their rights.

The Chilean law has strengthened the concept of individual rights, and this has reduced the collective power of the unions and their capacity to negotiate. Only the unions of a particular firm can negotiate. Since part-time workers can only be affiliated to industry-wide unions, they are much more vulnerable. The most frequent complaint of part-time workers concerns salary and job security.

Full-time workers can affiliate themselves to the company unions which negotiate the conditions of work. A group of company unions can establish a federation, and a group of federations can establish a confederation.

Through increasing the flexibility of the organization of their production processes, and by reducing their labour costs, businesses are attempting to maintain competitiveness without affecting their profit rates. This is making jobs even more insecure.

In addition to the benefits provided to the industrial sector by the State through its subsidy policies on credit export promotion, etc., and through the intensive exploitation of available marine resources, the absence of effective controls and the presence of abundant and cheap workforce have made possible the growth and expansion of the sector. ♣

This article, translated by Brian O’ Riordan, has been written by Estrella Diaz, a member of Hexagrama Consultants, Santiago, Chile, Diaz is a sociologist who specializes in issues of gender and employment

