

Latin America / Chile**Unaccounted and undervalued**

Even though women are highly involved as workers in artisanal fisheries and in their communities, their roles have been constantly undermined and undervalued.

by Fabio Iacomini of Terra Nuova, Italy

In a context where development is identified fundamentally with the exploitation of natural resources, and where fishing is mainly associated with men in the sector, the work and presence of women is largely invisible. Illustrative of this is the fact that only since 2001 has gender been included as a variable in the official register of the sector. However, the Artisanal Fishing Register of the Servicio Nacional de Pesca (SERNAPESCA) does not recognize the support activities generally undertaken by women, which include baiting hooks, processing and the direct sale of fishery products. What is more, only 4,105 women are officially recorded in the artisanal fishing register as being directly involved with artisanal fishing, a figure far from reality, and estimated to be only 10-18 per cent of the female workforce associated with fisheries.

This situation marginalizes women in the various government programmes: if they are not taken into account, how can they become the focus of any development strategy? A similar situation exists with the official programmes that aim to improve productivity in the sector, through larger-scale production, requiring higher levels of organization. Groups of women interested in developing economic and productive activities tend to be excluded.

This prompted the Women's Network of the Confederación Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Chile (CONAPACH) to prioritize the issue of access to, and control over, natural resources as a key strategy. In effect, because women are not recognized as actors in the fisheries sector, they cannot claim any access rights. The control they can exercise over the resources they harvest or those on which their work depends, is even lesser. They can neither show any record of their past activities in production nor any landing figures that could be used to claim historic rights. This has a particularly important bearing

in the context of the fisheries management model being currently promoted, which is strongly geared towards the privatization of resources, and the establishment of fishing quotas based mainly on recorded catch histories. This policy has been fiercely contested by organizations of artisanal fishermen, who feel that their fishing rights are threatened.

This situation, combined with the intrinsic uncertainty and insecurity of fishing, is made even worse by the fact that neither men nor women benefit from any savings or insurance schemes, greatly increasing the social vulnerability.

A further aspect that affects a significant number of women is that their productive work is not valorized. The work of fishermen's wives is seen as an extension of their roles in the family. This also includes the support activities of their daughters and other female relations. It is thus difficult to assign any economic value to their work, which generally remains invisible, along with all their domestic tasks, and makes it difficult for them to get access to any professional occupational training. In addition, their participation in unions and other organizational activities is restricted, and they are excluded from any healthcare and insurance schemes.

Another issue is women's low levels of participation in decisionmaking and their representation in artisanal fishing organizations. Thus, for example, in CONAPACH's previous 21-member National Committee (prior to 2004), there were only three women. At the local level, there were no women presidents in any of the 24 regional federations, and only 14 women in the entire country were presidents of union bodies out of a total of 504 artisanal fishing organizations at the national level.

Nevertheless, there have been important increases in the numbers of women found in organizations with jobs that require low levels of decision-making—as treasurers and secretaries in unions and federations. It is important to highlight that some women's capabilities for financial management are held in high regard, and their skills for handling cash and for financial management are generally recognized by fishermen and particularly appreciated by their leaders, an accomplishment that is associated with their gender.



This provides the context for addressing many of the practical needs of women engaged in the sector, which are difficult to resolve without dealing with issues such as access to resources and decisionmaking.

Contact Fabio at: fabioiacomini@yahoo.com