

Europe/ Spain

For there to be a future...

Women shellfish gatherers in Spain are getting organized to protect their resources and to improve their livelihoods

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50-year old Eulalia is a shellfish gatherer in a Galician *ria* in north Spain, with hardly any education. Her health is in a fragile state aggravated by the problems specifically resulting from her profession as a shellfish gatherer. She was not aware of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that took place at Rio in 1992, or of the Agenda 2,1 which deals with the most pressing problems of today and attempts to prepare the world for tomorrow's challenges by advocating sustainable development and the participation of all. In her small, hard and humid world of the shore, no information arrived about such an important event.

For Eulalia's 28-year old daughter Maruxa, pursuing an education was not easy. Nevertheless, despite the family's precarious social and economic situation, at 18 she managed to complete her school certificate studies. In a labour market that provides few options for the young, she decided to follow in the footsteps of her mother and take up shellfish gathering. It was not easy for her to adapt, and for a while she resisted, rebelling and telling herself that she wanted something better and far removed from the deprivations suffered by her mother, which she had witnessed from an early age. But, finally, she accepted her fate and gradually, not only did she take it up wholeheartedly, but, for the love of her mother and for the sake of her future, she chose to involve herself in improving the conditions of her profession. She is now struggling to find solutions to the problems faced by the sector.

Maruxa is an active member of an Association that defends the social and economic interests of women shellfish gatherers. She is aware that this militancy is not easy and that it needs a lot of strength and dedication, but she is ready to follow it through. She knows all the basic laws that apply to the shellfish sector: the Galician Fisheries law, the Galician Co-operatives Law, the norm governing the establishment of Associations. She knows everything about

Fishermen's *cofradías*, about decrees that regulate the extraction of molluscs, about fishing and shellfish licenses (PERMEX), about decrees governing fishing gears and trade, about the penalty regime, etc.

Maruxa did hear about Agenda 21 and, of course, she understood the references to marine pollution, and to the need to protect the oceans, to make rational use of living resources, and to improve the dignity of the people who depend on the sea. She understood the great importance of promoting education, training, and awareness among users, officials, fishermen, women and youth in order to achieve sustainable development and to deepen the traditional understanding of the environment. She understood the importance of social and cultural values and of teaching respect for the resources. She understood very well the role of women in this world. She knows that she is not alone, that there are many Maruxas in this world who are fighting for the same dream. She knows the strength that can come from linking together women from around the world with the same problems for finding appropriate collective solutions.



In the last Assembly of the Association, Maruxa spoke. With all the participants applauding, she spoke convincingly and passionately about the need to be fearless, to participate, struggle, learn, and clearly establish the role of women.

From the back row, and although she did not understand

some of the things so enthusiastically spoken by her daughter, Eulalia felt proud of her and felt that in some way things were going to change for the better in the work from which she and her generation had reaped more suffering than benefit.

In the depths of her thoughts Eulalia heard the voice of Maruxa saying, "...it is fundamental to recognize and strengthen the role of women in fisheries and in the integrated development of the community, as well as their participation at all levels of the decision-making that affects the sector.... We will also work towards the day when women shellfish gatherers take up managerial positions in the fishery..."

Many women like her are needed to stop land-based pollution caused by dumping industrial and urban wastes, oil pollution, the destruction of beaches through the so-called 'beach regeneration' schemes, the appropriation of shellfish areas for 'beach leisure', the municipal destruction of the coast with urbanization and the degradation of coastal marshy areas. Indeed, these women are urgently needed to stop the destruction and to re-establish the balance... for there to be a future.

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