

## Latin America/ Chile

### Shared concerns

#### *Notes from a trip to Chile*

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In October 2001 I had the privilege of spending two days in Valparaíso, Chile, with the National Confederation of Artisanal Fishermen from Chile (CONAPACH), the fishworker organization of Chile. I was well received by Kim Cooperrider and Jéssica Alfaro, professionals working for the project "Women weaving networks to promote the sustainable future of our communities (*caletas pesqueras*)". Though my visit was very brief, I would like to share some of my impressions as well as the information I collected about this project being undertaken by a national fishermen's union.

Having been engaged with ICSF's Women in Fisheries Programme in Brazil for some years, I sought to learn about the Chilean experience in promoting gender issues in fisheries. I also sought to explore the possibility of establishing regular contacts between Chilean and Brazilian groups and organizations sensitive to such issues. My purpose was also to invite CONAPACH to collaborate in a new participatory newsletter project on women in fisheries initiated by several organizations in north and northeastern Brazil.

CONAPACH congregates about 400 unions and has approximately 40,000 members. In 1998 CONAPACH instituted its Women's Department, which has sought to promote and support women's groups and their economic initiatives in fishing *caletas* around the country. Luisa Pineda, a fisherwoman from the South of the country, is the director of the Women's Department. Luisa had earlier visited Brazil, in June 2000, as a member of the CONAPACH delegation that participated in a meeting organized by ICSF in the state of Ceará on *Gender and Coastal Fishing Communities in Latin America*.

In November 2000 the women's department began the implementation of the above-mentioned project, being financed by the *Fondo de las Americas* agency. According to Kim and Jéssica, the project's aim is to create a network of women who will act as environmental educators in fishing communities and unions. In fact, for several years Chile has been facing

serious problems due to the high pressure on fisheries resources as well as related environmental and economic problems. This led the Government to institute new policies to manage fisheries resources. The introduction of individual fishing quotas has raised serious controversies within the artisanal sector and between workers on industrial fishing fleets.

In concrete terms, explained Kim, the project seeks to educate women who are "concerned about the future of the small-scale fishing industry and the survival of fishing communities". According to CONAPACH leaders, the integration of women is a natural step, especially given the present context of Chilean fisheries. The participation of women promises to strengthen the organization while boosting its political power.

In addition to local efforts to develop organizational skills and knowledge about environmental issues associated with the artisanal fishing industry, the project has, over the last year, begun to facilitate the formation of a national women's network. In a national meeting held in January 2001 in Valparaíso, the participants decided to elect zonal coordinators. This network is expected to contribute to the recognition of the women's traditionally invisible roles in the small-scale fishing industry. Subsequently, it might contribute to consolidating the organizational, political, social and economic force of the artisanal fisheries sector.

According to a brochure of the project: "At present, artisanal fishermen in Chile are defending their cultural and productive patrimony. The destruction of the coastal environment may lead to the disappearance of artisanal fisheries. Therefore, the participation, integration, and organization of men and women is crucial."

Some results of the women's meetings held through the project:

- Growing knowledge about women's roles in production and in sustaining fishing communities, within the local and regional contexts;
- Preparation of projects on organization and economic support;
- Identification of women's interests and needs and the development of methodologies for the project to work with their organizations;
- Identification of health and educational problems

that fishing communities face.

As in other countries, there are no available statistics that reflect women's actual contribution in the fisheries. According to an estimate by CONAPACH, women constitute about 10 per cent of the workforce in the fisheries sector in Chile. They work as *encarnadoras* (baiters), fish processors, seaweed collectors and as sellers of fish products.

Local labour and organizational conditions vary along the long Chilean coast. According to Kim and Jéssica, the project intends to facilitate the integration of women in existing fishermen's unions and organizations, in accordance with CONAPACH guidelines. In the event that there is no organization of fishermen, women may consider forming an organization of their own. That was the case in San Antonio, a town about two hours from Valparaíso, where a women's union of *encarnadoras* was formed with CONAPACH support earlier this year. CONAPACH, through the project, has continued to support this initiative. CONAPACH leaders estimate that more than 800 *encarnadoras* live in San Antonio.

I had the opportunity to visit a community near Valparaíso—*caleta* El Membrillo—a lively fishing port where the 'Union of Independent Workers and Fishermen of *caleta* El Membrillo', founded in 1936, is located. According to the President, the union has 200 members, of which only 10 are women. The President is presently engaged in integrating women into the union.

In fact, the *encarnadoras* play a very active role in the fisheries, given that the use of hooks is common in the artisanal fisheries of Chile. Longlines, with hundreds of hooks, have to be baited before each fishing trip. In general, every crew engages an *encarnadora* or *encarnador* to prepare the hooks. Most of the *encarnadores* are women. On the day of my visit some young men were working among the women. As the workers are paid only after the fishermen get back to shore, they also share in the risks involved in fish capture and sale.

I spoke with a 55-year old woman who has been an *encarnadora* baiting hooks for 36 years. Engraved on her hands were signs of the constant handling of knives, hooks, lines, in ever humid and cold conditions. The

work of the baiters involves standing in front of a kind of table where the lines are laid out so they can bait each hook.

*Encarnadoras* are independent workers whose daily earnings depend on the orders they receive and their ability to accomplish the job. Depending on the volume of landings, they can work from a few hours to half a day at the port. Many are single mothers. In El Membrillo port about 30 people work as baiters. They pay a tax to the port administration in order to work there. If they unionize they are supposed to pay the monthly fee of the union. Efforts to organize them are still in the initial stages. Organizing these women, who often find themselves without work due to the "closing of the quota" after the quota for the catch has been reached, and who, as housewives and single mothers do not have much time to participate in meetings and events, remains a challenge.



The professionals engaged in the project are enthusiastic. They are very concerned about the future achievements of the project, and hope that it remains a priority for the CONAPACH. They raise concerns that are shared by others engaged with gender issues in fisheries, such as: How to create legitimate spaces for women, alongside men, within fishermen's organizations? How to create strong organizations, able to sustain themselves? How to respond to the existing urgent economic demands of women?

The methodology of this project and the experiences of CONAPACH's Women's Department, merits attention and reflection, especially by leaders of fishermen's organizations and women's groups from other countries in Latin America. It is necessary to increase networking and sharing of interesting experiences of citizenship in the fisheries sector.

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