

DOCUMENTARY

The Last of the Sea Women

Directed by Sue Kim; Produced by A24
Duration: 87 mins; Language: Korean

By Amélie Tapella
 (amelie.icsf@gmail.com), Programme
 Manager, ICSF, Italy

South Korea's Jeju Island is famous, we are told in *The Last of the Sea Women*, for three things: rocks, wind, and women. This is a film about small-scale fishing women who have shaped an island and its ecosystem, and now find themselves in a race against forces they can see but struggle to stop: warming seas, contaminated waters, ageing bodies, and the absence of a younger generation willing to follow in their footsteps.

The film profiles the 'haenyeo', Jeju's community of female free-divers, who for centuries have harvested seafood from the ocean floor using only their breath, their bodies, and self-imposed rules to keep the sea alive. It is also a document of what is lost as women's knowledge, small-scale fisheries and community-based stewardship disappear.

The haenyeo are mostly in their sixties, seventies and eighties. They begin work at 7:30 a.m., spend four hours at sea, diving up to 300 times a day, holding their breath for up to two minutes and descending more than five metres, the depth at which pressure makes each ascent gruelling. They collect abalone, sea urchins and sea snails, then spend another four hours ashore preparing it for sale, with the full value chain in their hands.

"If I catch a lot, I am not tired," one woman says. "If I catch little, I am. But the ocean always moves me."

At its peak in the 1960s, the haenyeo community numbered around 30,000 on an island of 200,000 people. Girls once began training at seven, becoming full haenyeo by their mid-teens. Today, fewer than 4,000 remain, and this generational rupture is one of their quiet tragedies. Following UNESCO's 2016 recognition of the haenyeo as Intangible Cultural Heritage, a training school opened at Gwideok: of the 840 trained, just five percent have continued to practise. The work is too hard, the young say, and there are other options now. Still, a handful of women in their thirties have chosen to become haenyeo,

using social media to reach younger audiences and carry the tradition forward.

The haenyeo model also rewards environmental attention. They avoid oxygen tanks, relying instead on artisanal tools, seasonal

limits and collective rules. It is a community-led system built by women who depended on it for survival and passed it down intact. Agricultural runoff poisons the sea floor, seagrasses have disappeared, warming currents have brought tropical and invasive species to Jeju, and marine species are retreating to greater depths, raising an uncomfortable question: how much longer will this work remain possible?

The haenyeo were among the first to act after Japan's 2023 decision to release treated wastewater from Fukushima into the Pacific, a process expected to last decades. The women joined environmental protests, and Soon Deok Jang, one of the oldest haenyeo, travelled to Geneva to address the UN Human Rights Council. The scene is powerful, but unsettling too, raising a question familiar to small-scale fisheries communities: how much weight is given to the testimony of those who depend on threatened environments, when decisions are shaped by states, industries and experts far removed from local realities?

"If I met someone who thought it right to dump contaminated water into the sea, I would ask them: don't you have a future?", Sohee Jin, the youngest haenyeo, says.

A decade prior to the film, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) called for fishers and fishworkers to be treated as rights-holders, with access to decent work, social protection, health, safety and gender equality. The haenyeo's experience shows how incomplete this vision remains in practice. They symbolise Jeju's identity, yet recognition has not been matched by labour protection or social security. Their work involves risks, including strong currents, hypoxia, disorientation, exhaustion and injury. Assistance is available to families when a haenyeo dies at sea, but injured divers often have no formal protection and must rely on family or community support.

The haenyeo are not merely the last representatives of a fast-disappearing world, but sentinels of a future that concerns everyone. Their struggle connects food sovereignty, labour, gender, ecological knowledge, cultural continuity and ocean justice. They remind us that stewardship is a lived practice embedded in memory, collective rules and responsibility across generations, and this is why we should all care. **Y**



PUBLISHED BY
 International Collective in
 Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)
 Oetewalerstraat 46, 1093
 JV Amsterdam,
 The Netherlands
 Email: icsf@icsf.net

Website: www.icsf.net

EDITED BY
 Siddharth Premkumar

 DESIGNED BY
 M.S. Vasanth Christopher

Writers and potential
 contributors to YEMAYA,
 please note that write-ups
 should be brief, about 2000
 words. They could deal with

issues that are of direct
 relevance to women and men
 of fishing communities. They
 could also focus on recent
 research or on meetings and
 workshops that have raised
 gender issues in fisheries.
 Also welcome are life stories
 of women and men of fishing
 communities working towards
 a sustainable fishery or for a

recognition of their work within
 the fishery. Please also include
 a one-line biographical note on
 the writer.

Please do send us comments
 and suggestions at icsf@icsf.net
 to make the newsletter more
 relevant. We look forward
 to hearing from you and to
 receiving regular write-ups for
 the newsletter.