

Europe/ Spain

Shaking up traditions

A women's association from El Pamar, Valencia, Spain is challenging the age-old patrilineal system, in which only the male offspring of fishermen inherit rights to fish

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El Palmar is a small place, with 850 inhabitants, under the administration of the provincial capital, Valencia. It is located on an island in Lake Albufera of Valencia. Forty years ago, it had no overland access. Communication was by boat, and this was the only way to travel to the outside world. From the beginning, the inhabitants subsisted mainly on fishing in the lake. They belonged to the Comú of Fishermen, which has its origins in the Gremial movements at the turn of the 11th century.

For their own benefit and for geographical reasons, a "fishermen's community" was formed, charged with protecting the fishery and the interests of the fishermen members. This began to operate independently from the Comú of Fishermen. Only men could participate in the organization and share the benefits generated by it, and these rights were passed on to male children. Daughters were excluded from any inheritance rights related to the fishery. The interest of fathers was to find a fisherman to marry their daughters off to, so as to be able to continue the community custom. The marriage of a daughter to a forester, or a non-fisherman, was accepted only with reservations.

Thus functioned the organization of fishermen until 1994. That was when the only women's association in the area decided to propose to the fishermen's community the possibility of adopting changes in the constitutional rules. They were asked to consider the possibility of allowing their daughters equal rights to their sons to inherit, enjoy, and pass on fishing rights.

It is hard to understand the reasons for maintaining age-old customs that deny women's participation, especially in a place like Valencia, at such a short distance from the capital. This was what prompted our women's association to claim some of our constitutional rights that we were—and are still—entitled to.

Women had never formed part of any public entity, until the founding of the Housewives Association of

Tyrius in El Palmar. Several activities were organized through this association to improve the situation of women and to escape from the subservience to husbands or fathers. These included training courses, cultural visits, trips and conferences. Women could only operate in private and not in public. They could not even go to the city alone, or go into a bar, as this was not considered acceptable. It was only in religious *cofradiás* that women were given positions of responsibility for organizing social activities in the community. The time had come to raise the possibility of changing this situation of sexual discrimination that women had to put up with. And this was how the contest between men and women started.

We tried to change tradition, imposed by the force of custom and submission. We have been condemned as rebels by the closed society of El Palmar for daring to bring before the courts the local culture that has been passed on from generation to generation. We had shown evidence to the outside world of the local ethnocentricity, which is considered to be above justice and the Constitution.

We had tried to remedy the sexual discrimination that denies daughters the right to inherit fishing rights, either to use them or to pass them on. Above all, it is only the male children of fishermen who may become part of the fishermen's community of El Palmar. This excludes daughters and their children, if they marry outside the community. It does not matter if a fisherman's wife is a local or an outsider, because the only way that fishing rights may be inherited is through the father.

The rest of the local community has denounced the social changes proposed by us. Our women's association had taken the case to the local tribunals, and, despite having won the court case, until today, July 2003, the judgement, dating October 1998, has still not been fully complied with.

Those of us who have tried to advance the struggle for equal rights have been injured by other women, like ourselves, who have defended the male territory of the fishermen's community. Ironically, even though it is they who stand to gain from our achievements, they are preventing us from enabling them to benefit from equal rights.

We felt that we could use the women's organization, which had now been consolidated, to begin to claim our rights as human beings, as laid down in the Constitution. The restriction on inheriting fishing rights also affected the sons of women who, although they were cousins of fishermen, had no rights to fish because their fathers' were not fishers. We felt that we should act to change such discrimination. And so we did. Our first step was to seek dialogue and consensus. But that proved useless. Having a dialogue with women was not acceptable. The second step was to make an act of conciliation; this proposal was also rejected. And, finally, we instigated legal proceedings on the grounds of sexual discrimination. We won on all legal counts in our country.

Our proceedings have not been free of incidents. All kinds of restrictions were imposed on us to force our acquiescence to the fishermen's community. Demands that were impossible to fulfill, expulsion of fishermen who supported the position of the women petitioners, street demonstrations to have us thrown out of the community, graffiti, insults... we were subjected to a degree of social ostracism hard to imagine. We were being isolated from the social milieu in which we were born and raised. This also affected our closest family members, fathers and children. Even our friends suffered due to their friendship with us.

Men assert that fishing is only a man's work, and women should look after those aspects needed to carry it out. Even daughters and wives defended this male worldview.

The most unexpected response came from the very women for whom our petition was intended. In 1999, they formed a women's association parallel to our own, with the single objective of attacking us and defending the position of the fishermen. Those belonging to this collective were actually those who stood to benefit from the gains we had achieved. People who were prepared to make a written apology, atoning for defending our position, were forgiven and were allowed to become part of the fishermen community. The most grievous injuries came, and continue to come, from women defending either their husbands or the fishermen community. The most regrettable aspect is that, at the local level, the authorities were closer to the other group's position than to ours.

People were afraid to approach us, for fear of being attacked by the opposite side. They were afraid of being on the receiving end of the rejection that we were daily subjected to. Fear, repression and lack of information were ideally suited to keep the rest of us subjugated to those who shouted the loudest. Women who dared to raise their voices were silenced or castigated. Most worrying was that these reactions did not come only from the older generation. Even the younger generation, included schoolgoing boys and girls, accepted and copied the behaviour of their fathers or mothers. We were made unwelcome and prevented from entering certain public places.



We sometimes ask ourselves if it is still necessary for a group of people to go through what we have suffered to succeed in getting fair treatment. It may be incomprehensible, but the specificity of situations requires cases to be analyzed separately. And what comes out of a situation may be totally unexpected. We are women who have pushed for changes. We brought to justice a hierarchical social organization that marginalized a group of people, and we are paying a very high price for that.

Despite everything, we believe that it has been worth the trouble to shake to its foundations an institution with outdated customs, and to open its eyes so that it can look at itself in today's context. It reassures us to know that people in different places, entities and institutions recognize what we have done. We are encouraged to know that people in many diverse walks of life share our opinions. We have been awarded very important distinctions, prizes, recognition... all this for the struggle that our association took up. But our neighbours neither accept nor recognize the work that we initiated, and what we achieved through an association of women.

(This article has been summarized from the presentation made by Carmen Serrano Soler at a recent workshop organized by the European-level FEMME network in Vaasa, Finland. It has been reproduced with permission from the author.)

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