

**Asia / Pakistan****Ready for the struggle**

*Pakistan's first-ever fisherwomen's convention took place in July 2005, as a large assembly of women from the fishing villages of Sindh*

**By the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF)**

On 10 July 2005 the Karachi Press Club witnessed a large assembly of women working in the fishing sector, at the first-ever Fisherwomen's Convention organized by the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF). Representatives of various civil society organizations, including women members of parliament (MPs), attended. The fisherwomen, who came from fishing villages of the coastal and inland fishing areas, highlighted their problems through tableaux, folk songs and other cultural shows that simultaneously provided entertainment.

In his presidential address, Haji Shafi Jamote, Director, Fishermen Co-operative Society (FCS), underlined the need for fisherfolk communities to be provided their due share and the recognition that only fishermen have the right to catch fish without any interference. He opposed the contract system, which exploits poor fishermen. He appreciated the struggle of PFF against the contract system and lauded the leadership role of PFF Chairman, Mohammad Ali Shah.

The chief guest of the convention, Vice Chairperson of the First Women's Bank, Shafqat Sultana, appreciated the PFF for organizing such a big gathering of women to discuss their problems. She said that her bank provides easy loans to small entrepreneur women for running businesses. She pledged to assist PFF members in getting loans for purchasing sewing machines and so on.

In their speeches, the women MPs paid rich tributes to fisherwomen for waging a war against exploitation of their rights. They particularly appreciated the role of fisherwomen in fully participating in rallies and hunger strikes in the struggle against the contract system in fisheries.

Sassui Palejo said that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the world has achieved a lot of progress, the fisherwomen in Sindh are living miserable lives. They do not even have basic facilities like drinking

water, education and healthcare. She regretted that the government has not taken any steps to bring positive changes in the lives of fisherwomen. She said the rulers are only concerned about the development of the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad; they do not have any concern about Ketī Bandar, Ibrahim Haidri, Shah Bandar and other coastal villages of Sindh. Are these not part of Pakistan, she asked.

Shazia Atta Mari pointed out that over one million women of Sindh are living below the poverty line. She said the women in rural areas do not enjoy any basic rights. The conditions of fisherwomen are even more deplorable, she added.

Muttahida Majlis-e-Ammal Mohammad Hussain Mehnati said that PFF has always highlighted the issues of poor people. He assured his full co-operation in solving the fisherfolk's problems.

Addressing the participants of the convention, the PFF Chairman, Mohammad Ali Shah, congratulated the fishermen for their successful struggle against the contract system. He said that due to the continuous struggle by PFF, the Sindh government has been forced to withdraw the contract system.

Mohammad Ali Shah reiterated that the PFF would not sit silently, as the government has still not issued a notification regarding the contract system. Moreover, he said the PFF wanted a permanent solution of the problem through legislations. He said PFF would organize a Mallah Convention against the contract system in Hyderabad, in which thousands of fishermen from all over Sindh would participate. He said that this convention too would celebrate the success of the struggle against the contract system.

The PFF Chairman regretted that hundreds of thousands of fisherwomen in Sindh are living their lives like animals. He said that even though the male members of the fishing communities are also leading inhuman lives, the condition of women is much more miserable. The women not only have to work in their homes and raise their children, but also have to share with their male partners the work in fishing-related activities.

He paid rich tributes to the fisherwomen for making the campaign against the contract system a success. He said the fisherwomen have now found a way to

solve their problems and are inviting their friends and colleagues to organize themselves around one united platform to save their livelihoods.

Mohammad Ali Shah said the participation of such a large number of women at the convention indicates that fisherwomen have now woken up to their rights and are ready for the struggle against every injustice.

In her welcome address, the chief of PFF's Women's Wing, Tahira Ali, said that fisherwomen have proved themselves an equally strong force within PFF. She spoke about the problems of the fisherwomen. They have to take equal part in fishing activities like rowing boats, pulling in nets, carrying fish catches and selling the fish in the market. At home, they have to collect wood for fuel, fetch water, clean the homes and cook food, she added. Apart from such difficult schedules, they lack proper medical facilities, and many lose their lives during childbirth. The women of Sindh are working like machines, she remarked.

Tahira Ali pointed out that women members of PFF have fully taken part in every movement for the rights of fisherfolk, and the recent success in the campaign against the contract system is due to the total participation of the women. She pointed out that it was for the first time in the history of Pakistan that PFF was organizing a convention for fisherwomen.

The General Secretary of PFF, Saeed Balcoh, said that without fisherwomen, the PFF is incomplete. He said that the female members are effectively performing their duties in the activities of PFF. He pointed to how at this meeting, thousands of women demanded the abolition of the contract system once and for all and the introduction, in its place, of a licensing system.

At the end of the convention, the following resolutions were passed:

- The historical rights of fishermen to the fishing grounds should be recognized by removing the contract system and granting them licences, so that they can freely fish in all the lakes, rivers, ponds and coastal areas.
- Fisherwomen should be allowed to participate equally in fishing activities. They engage in fishing-related activities, along with male members, in catching fish, weaving nets, repairing boats, drying



fish and selling the catch in the market. With the commercialization of fishing, several of the women have been marginalized. The government should provide them some alternative employment opportunities and compensations.

- Many women suffer from lack of medical care in the fishing villages. To save precious human lives, basic healthcare units and maternity homes should be set up in the villages. These should be apart from other basic amenities and facilities.
- Due to shortage of water in fishing villages, fisherwomen have to draw water from sources situated many miles from their homes. Water supply schemes should be initiated in fishing villages to solve the water problem in those settlements.
- Electricity and gas facilities should be provided to fishing villages spread in far-flung areas along banks of rivers, canals, lakes and coastal areas, so that women can be spared the tiresome labour of cutting fuelwood.
- Handicraft and vocational training centres should be established in fishing villages to provide alternative employment opportunities for fisherwomen.
- A ban on destructive nets and fishing techniques should be strictly enforced, and deep-sea fishing trawlers should be banned as well.

- Primary and secondary schools should be established to provide education to fisherwomen.
- Over two million acres of land in the Indus delta area has been claimed by the sea due to the lack of flow in the downstream Indus river. Due to this situation, the older settlements of the delta area have been ruined, and that has affected the women and children, who are faced with migration, unemployment and various diseases. This convention demands that the required water should be released in the downstream Kotri barrage to stop the sea intrusion and to rehabilitate the fisherfolk.
- The poisonous water of the Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD) project is being discharged into the Manchhar lake, which has become highly polluted, affecting the environment and livelihood resources of the people of the area. The government should immediately stop the poisonous and polluted discharge of RBOD into the Manchhar lake. The affected families should be provided adequate compensation.
- The convention also demands the withdrawal of plans to dispose of RBOD's polluted water into the sea through the Gharao creek. The participants were of the opinion that every city and province is responsible for treating all its sewerage water, and disposing polluted water from one city or province into another should be stopped forthwith.