

Latin America / Chile

Fishing for generations

Women in Chile are out at sea with their husbands. And they are not work-shy. Their only worry is leaving their children alone in case something goes wrong.

This article, by Soledad Neira, first appeared in the Chilean Daily “El Mercurio”

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PUERTO MONTT - “Lets get out fast, or else we won’t leave here alive,” said Bernardita Llancapani to her husband, trying to stay upright in their fishing boat. All around, a violent storm pounded the gulf of Comau in the Province of Palena, Los Legos, Region.

The launches seem like nutshells leaping across 4- and 5-m-high waves. Bernardita has got no time to be scared. All her thoughts are on her three- and five-year old daughters waiting for them in Quiaca, on the Isle of Llancahué. “We are going to die. What will become of them?” she reflects, whilst her husband urges her not to lose hope.

They had gone out fishing with other relatives when they heard a Navy warning. A storm was brewing and the only safe haven was private, in Huinay. They would have to ride out the storm on the ocean, where they could lose their launch, with their lives on the line.

Quiaca is an island locality in Hualaihué. Thirty-three families live there and all the women are fishermen. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters and granddaughters all go out in their fragile craft for days at a time. Most go with their husbands. Others, on their own, manage their own boats.

All are inscribed in the fishing registers and have up-to-date licences. In Bernardita’s family, three generations of women have fished. She, her mother and grandmother Clotilde, 56 years old, who, since being widowed, has worked alone. Shipwrecks and serious material losses do not deter them. Although in Chile fishing is historically man’s work, increasingly women are going to sea with their husbands or working as crew. They even have their own unions.

The catch quota set by the National Fisheries Service (Sernapesca) is for 330 kg, but at times, they don’t

catch even 12 kg and hardly receive CLP700 (around 1 Euro) per kg. With such a low quota, says Rosa Ojeda from Quiaca, if her husband had to pay a crew, there would not be enough to go round. So that’s why she has to go fishing too.

They start work during childhood. They learn the ropes in summer “when there is less hardship”. “In winter you get soaked and it is very dangerous”, says Bernardita, who has been fishing since the age of six. They also engage in lesser tasks, like baiting and cleaning the hooks. When working as a crew, you must always be on the alert. One false move, and you are in the water, she says.

Alejandra Contreras, from the island of Juan Fernández, is now an expert lobster fisher. Bait must be caught, put in the traps, and the traps set. Day in day out they must be lifted and checked, and then reset.

Two thousand km to the south, Miguelina Oyarzún, who is 64, and comes from Chiloé, has worked at sea since the age of 22 in Punta Arenas. She used to fish for bass (*robalo*) or hoki (*merluza de cola larga*). Then she tried her hand at spider crabs. She has two boats, *La Gordi* and *La Marina*, and hopes to be at sea in July, in the spider crab season. She has had two serious accidents, but “I have never thought about leaving the sea. If I have to die there, so be it”, she says.

In Antofagasta, Daniza Orrego, who is 26 and nicknamed “La Chunga”, has followed after her father as crew. Mother of four children, she is the only person interviewed who has felt discriminated against. All the others have even felt welcomed and supported by their men.

Daniza recalls an occasion when she entered the fish-hold to unload: “My fellow workers got angry. They thought that I was there to waste time. But I was doing the same work as them”, she says. There is always one such case, and often there are strange happenings. Once, when on the verge of going under, everyone took off their clothes to jump overboard, only Daniza kept her clothes on.

The women don’t fear the sea, but they respect it. “One is always ready for an accident to happen. But you’ve got to go, for the children’s sake. To get on”, underlines Rosa Ojeda.

Out of the 50,000 Chilean fishermen registered by the National Fisheries Service, 2,089 are women. The Lakes Region (Los Lagos) has the greatest number: 11,500 men and nearly 1,000 women. The Region of Biobío follows, with 9,200 men and 550 women. In the Aisén Region, of the 2,000-odd fishermen, only 19 are women, who are scattered amongst the tiny localities between Puerto Cisnes, Puerto Aisén, Puyuhuapi, Isla Gala, Gaviota and Puerto Aguirre.