

Women in fisheries

## Different voices, similar concerns

**Sharing a vision, women from several countries agree to fight to retain their spaces within the world's fisheries**

A workshop on Gender Perspectives in Fisheries was held in Senegal in West Africa, between 10 and 18 June 1996, bringing to an 'official' end ICSF's Women in Fisheries (WIF) programme in India, Senegal, the Philippines and Thailand. The workshop brought together representatives of fishworker organizations, academics and activists from 13 countries in Asia, Europe, Canada, Africa, South Pacific and Latin America.

The participants shared reports detailing the role of women in fisheries in their respective countries, as well as the role of women in fishworkers' organizations. Participants from countries where the WIF programme had already been under way, namely, Senegal, India, the Philippines and Thailand, reported on the work done under the programme and the processes that had been initiated as a consequence. The programme has been instrumental in 'visibilizing' women's roles in fisheries, in facilitating the organization of women fishworkers and in increasing their representation in fishworker organizations.

It was observed that various strategies and organizational forms have been adopted by women fishworkers to address their concerns in different countries, each appropriate to the particular context and situation of the country concerned.

In India, for instance, women fishworkers, rather than forming separate women's organizations, are fighting for spaces within mainstream fishworker organizations to address issues that concern them. Their basic contention is that women married to fishermen automatically qualify for union membership by virtue of the fact

that they look after the household and sustain future generations, even if they are not directly involved in economically remunerative fishery-related activities.

In Canada, on the other hand, different strategies have been employed by women in fishing communities. Wives of fishermen organize as autonomous groups, join with fishermen's unions, and get together at the community level to protect the interests of coastal communities.

The discussion on women's participation in fishworker organizations revealed that, even though women have succeeded in finding a place within mainstream fishworker organizations in some countries, as in Senegal and India, they rarely occupy decision-making positions.

As a consequence, issues specifically concerning women are rarely addressed by these organizations. These include, for example, the problems women face at work in fisheries, such as the lack of adequate marketing, transport, storage and processing facilities, or the problems that they encounter within the household and community, such as violence directed at them.

Country reports at the workshop also revealed that the extent and form of women's participation in fishworker organizations and movements differ in the North and South. In the North, women of fishing communities are organized primarily as 'associations of wives of fishermen.'

### **Southern women**

In the South, women participate in organizations as fishworkers themselves, indicating that women still retain their spaces in fishing operations, primarily in

the processing and marketing of fish. This is also because women and men from the South involved in fisheries operations, on a part-time or full-time basis, do not generally require licenses to be regarded as fishworkers, unlike in the North.

**T**he issues taken up by women's organizations in the North and South differ too. In the North, the artisanal sector and way of life are under threat, as more and more artisanal fishers are being pushed out of the sector as a result of state-sponsored policies to reduce fishing capacity and to limit resource exploitation. State policies tend to be geared towards protecting the interests of large industry.

Under the Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system, for instance, licences to fish are often cornered by the more powerful economic interests, while smaller owner-operators are either eased out of the sector or forced into jobs on larger industrial vessels. Working conditions aboard these vessels are often poor and social security benefits inadequate, especially on distant-water fishing vessels operating under bilateral fishery agreements.

Associations of wives of fishermen in Europe, as in Spain and France, are demanding better working conditions aboard such vessels. They are also demanding better state support for

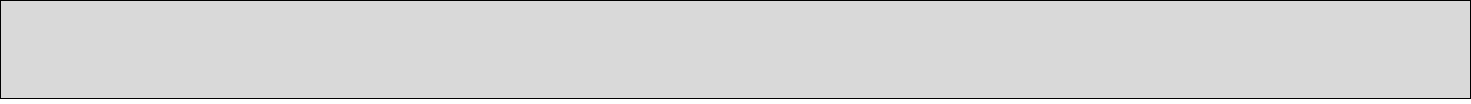
unemployed fishers or fishers displaced from the sector, especially during crisis periods.

As coastal communities in the North lose traditional access rights to fishery resources, the very culture and future of these communities are under threat. In Norway, the associations of wives of fishermen are demanding that coastal communities be given back their rights to fish freely in coastal waters, and that the state recognize the value of coastal communities and artisanal fisheries.

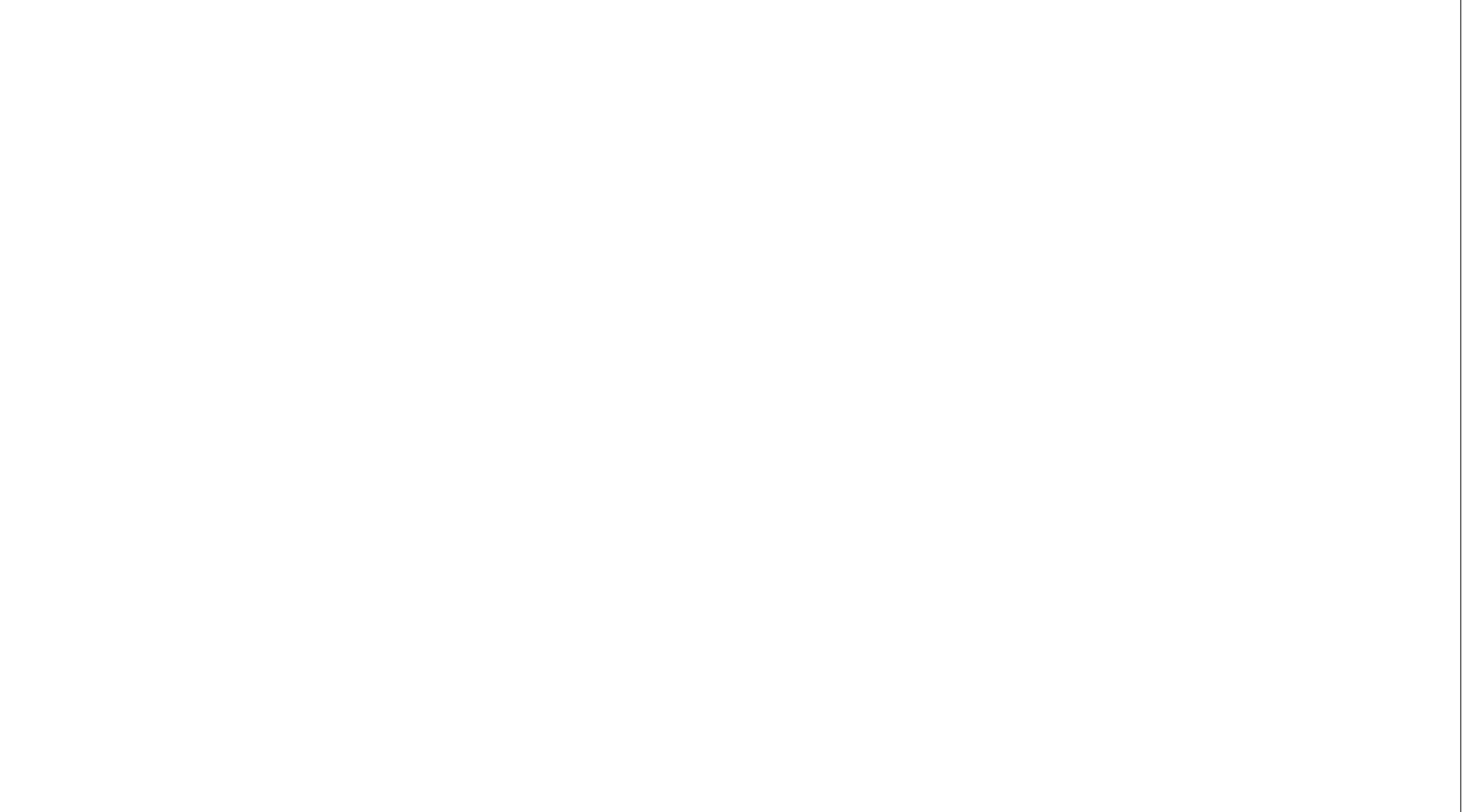
In Southern countries, on the other hand, women fishworkers are struggling to retain their spaces within the fisheries sector, in the face of the larger forces of globalization and liberalization. They are demanding access to better facilities for marketing, transport, storage and processing of fish. At the same time, they are joining forces with men in the artisanal sector to fight against the proliferation of destructive, super-efficient technologies such as trawling, within their waters. In Senegal, for instance, women are playing a prominent role in challenging inequitable agreements between their country and the EU, and in securing a better deal for artisanal fishworkers under such agreements.

#### **Areas of convergence**

Despite these differences, many areas of convergence between the women of the



**Gender**



North and the South emerged during the course of the workshop.

Participants from several countries perceived women as being more concerned with a broader gamut of issues, relating to fisheries as well as to the community. Participants from Canada stressed that, while men are in the forefront of struggles on fishery-related issues, women take the lead on issues that are central to maintaining the viability of artisanal fisheries and their communities.

Several other questions were debated and discussed during the workshop. What sort of alliances need to be formed, and with whom, to defend artisanal fisheries and the artisanal way of life, as well as the spaces of women within these? What sort of *programme politique* is required to address these issues?

The participants explored these questions in the context of the realities within their own countries. There was a broad consensus that cross-sectoral alliances of people's movements need to be formed with specific objectives, and a positive *programme politique* needs to emerge, if the artisanal fisheries and their way of life have to be sustained.

In Brazil, for instance, the artisanal fishery sector has made alliances with other marginalized groups such as farmers, landless peasants and indigenous peoples, to struggle for a recognition of their rights and for the espousal of an indigenous lifestyle. The necessity for regional alliances, as, for instance, among associations of wives of fishermen in Europe, was highlighted.

Southern country participants stressed the need to question the current development paradigm based on colonial and patriarchal values, and production for profit rather than production for sustenance of life and livelihood.

The impact of globalization on fisheries, on artisanal fishworkers and on women fishworkers was also debated. Globalization trends are eating into women's spaces in fisheries, often converting them from self-employed entrepreneurs involved in fish marketing and processing into inadequately

renumerated wage labourers in factories controlled by large industrial groups or multinational companies, trends very much in evidence in Thailand, the Philippines and India.

The workshop ended with a commitment to continue efforts towards defending and expanding women's spaces in fisheries and in fishworkers' organizations, in further developing an understanding of gender issues in fisheries with a focus on 'nurture', rather than on 'extraction' and 'exploitation', and in resolutely working towards a sustainable fishery and an artisanal way of life. 3

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