

# Marching for Justice

**A long march and a memorandum draw public attention to the fact that the lives and livelihoods of fisherwomen affected by the tsunami and the ongoing war in Sri Lanka's eastern coast, continue to hang in the balance**

By the **Eastern Women's Federation of Sri Lanka**, who can be contacted through Herman Kumara (wffp.gs@gmail.com and fishmove@slt.lk)

**O**n 08 March 2009, International Women's Day, over 1000 women from 30 villages in Ampara and Trincomalee districts on the east coast of Sri Lanka, displaced by the tsunami and the ongoing war, marched through the streets of Addalachchenai, Kalmunai demanding their right to lead a safe and dignified life. These women were members of the Eastern Women's Federation, a federation whose formation has been facilitated by the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement together with two partner organizations: DIFSO based in Ampara and TRIFSO in Trincomalee.

They marched to draw attention to the fact that nearly 33,000 women in the area have, so far, lost their husbands; and the children their fathers. Today, four years after the tsunami,

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International Women's Day march at Addalachchenai, Ampara District, Sri Lanka.

women of fishing communities, many of whom are now the primary breadwinners of their families, have still not been provided with basic facilities, proper housing and the means of earning a livelihood.

The women presented a memorandum to the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, Mr. Sivanesanathurai Chandrakanthan,

requesting government agencies and departments, relevant ministries, local bodies and non-governmental organizations to look into the specific problems faced by them.

The memorandum drew attention to both the general problems confronting the fishers as well as the specific problems women face. Many of the tsunami-affected families have still not been provided houses by the government. The LKR100,000 (US\$870) provided for the repair of houses was insufficient. People have no option but to continue living in camps even though living conditions are not good, and security, with many reported incidents of rape and child abuse in the camps, is a critical problem. Unemployment is on the rise and it is difficult to eke out a livelihood. Lack of medical facilities, inefficient health services, and shortage of doctors and drugs are some of the other issues highlighted in the memorandum.

In addition, women face a host of specific problems. They are unable to move about freely without protection. They are shackled by oppressive norms pertaining to education, employment, marriage and domestic duties. They face domestic violence and have to deal on a daily basis with alcoholism and drug addiction. They are also excluded from important decision-making processes.

Fishing communities are affected by poaching by foreign fishing craft; the destruction of fishing grounds by the use of destructive gear; uneven allocation of fishing grounds; and the arrest and detention of fishermen for long periods in foreign countries. Restrictions on night-time fishing, the ban on fishing in certain areas, and the closure of fishing grounds without any notice in the name of national security, are all issues that have led to a loss of income and livelihoods of the fishing communities on the east coast. The requirement to unload and load fish at checkpoints during the transportation of fish from Batticaloa and Ampara to the south and to Colombo, has increased expenses and reduced the quality of fish (and profits).

The memorandum asked for specific support from the government. A census of all tsunami-affected areas must form the basis of a concrete action plan, formulated in a participatory manner. The damage by the tsunami must be estimated and compensated. Housing must be

provided on a priority basis, and must include basic facilities such as toilets, electricity and drinking water.

The memorandum also demanded specific provisions for women who have lost their husbands, the primary breadwinners of the family, due to either the war or the tsunami, so that they can gain from adequate employment options to sustain their livelihoods; if no employment is available, they should be provided with a dole.

Women should be helped in getting a fair price for their fish, and efforts to improve the quality of fishery products, through appropriate technology, are necessary. Basic facilities such as transportation and storage, and technical knowledge through vocational centres, must be provided. Women's access to credit, to enable them to start their own small businesses, must be enhanced. Imports should be controlled if they negatively affect women's livelihoods.

Boats damaged in the war must be replaced. Craft and gear should either be jointly owned by men and women, or the women should be provided with separate ownership. The government should introduce surveillance boats to help fishermen in times of natural disasters.

Pertaining to the living and working environments of fishing communities, men,

women and children should be educated about environmental hazards and taught to keep their surrounding environment clean. Local authorities should take steps to build proper drainage systems to prevent the spread of diseases where water stagnates.

Security must be improved and women must be trained in self-defense. Authorities must take note of the activities of paramilitary groups that are forcibly seizing a part of fishermen's catches along the eastern coast. Fisher people must be guaranteed safe working conditions.

Concrete action should be taken to put an end to the sale of drugs. This should be done through law enforcement at the village level. Legal action against offenders is not enough; they should also be provided with rehabilitation facilities and some alternative employment.

An effective security system for the transportation of fish, like the one in Trincomalee (through the sealing of vehicles), should be introduced in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts as well.

The memorandum concluded with a demand for a dignified life and sustainable livelihoods for the people of Sri Lanka's eastern province who have been affected by war, the tsunami and displacement by development projects. ❏

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