

## Women can fish too

**The role of women in Peru's artisanal fishing sector is often obscured by machismo and bureaucracy**

**T**he Lima-based Huayuna Institute has initiated a study to increase the understanding of the role of women in fisheries. This article describes some of the researchers' initial findings after visiting some *caletas* (fishing communities) in southern Peru. It provides a preliminary snapshot and commentary on the situation in the areas where the work is being developed.

Peru abounds with natural resource wealth. With a coastline of approximately 3000 km, it has one of the most productive fisheries in the world.

In 1994, the combined recorded landings of fish and shellfish amounted to 11,533,611 tonnes. In 1995, Peru recorded the second largest national fish landings worldwide, after China. However, as much as 90 per cent of the catch is composed of anchovy and sardine, destined for reduction to fishmeal.

The 1997-98 El Niño—the worst this century—had a major impact on Peru. The fisheries sector was particularly hard hit. With the main species declining or disappearing from the catches, the sector was beset by serious social problems.

Peru's population reached 24 million in 1997, half of whom were women. This means that there are 12 million women dispersed between the rural and urban sectors.

The most recent survey, in 1996, by the Peruvian Marine Institute, IMARPE, put the numbers of artisanal fishermen in the country at between 35,000 and 50,000 (including both owners and crew members) in marine fisheries and at 15,000 in riverine and inland fisheries. It is noteworthy that there are no statistics on the women who work in the different

segments of the artisanal fisheries sector. Historically, women have fulfilled a key role in the development of the sector, mainly in the processing and marketing of fish. However, in recent years, women are increasingly to be found in those areas more traditionally associated with men, such as fish capture and going to sea on boats.

There are many *caletas* distributed along the coast. In the south, the study focused on Pucusana, Tambo de Mora, San Andres and San Juan de Marcona. But it is in the north that the fishing population is concentrated—Tijmhes, Piura and Lambayeque account for 51 per cent of the total population, and it is here that the highest fish landings are recorded. It is also important to note that fishing activities are much more developed in the north, and, as a consequence, so is the work of women in their respective communities.

Pucusana is a fishing *caleta* about 70 km south of Lima. Although widely known as a tourist resort, tourism provides no advantages to the fishermen and their families who live there. Wealthy tourists push up the cost of living, and compared to other *caletas*, fishing families here receive hardly any social security benefits.

In Pucusana, there are women who do nothing else but clean fish in the artisanal landing centre. However, about 10 years ago, some women started going out fishing with their husbands, and many fishermen's wives and daughters have started fishing from an early age.

### **Worrying sight**

On arrival at the local landing centre, we were greeted by a most worrying sight, which reflects what is happening along the entire Peruvian coastline. In the

aftermath of El Niño, most of the important fish species have not yet recovered to their historic levels and, because of this, most boats lie idle. Fishermen have to wait for the few boats to arrive, to help unload the catches or clean out the fish-holds. We also saw fishermen's wives competing for the same work as their husbands.

**M**aria, who married an artisanal fisherman after studying at the university, told us her story. They came to Pucusana eight years ago, and, for the last seven, she has worked alongside her husband to help raise their six children. Due to the difficult economic situation and the need to increase their family income, she decided to look for work. Of all the options open to her, she chose to go fishing with her husband. This has effectively doubled her workload.

Along with taking care of both the children and the household, she has to do the same jobs and work the same long hours as her husband—making nets, cleaning fish-holds, repairing boats, slicing up sharks, etc. She has to get up at 3 am. or 4 am., and does not get home until very late. Also, each day she goes fishing, she has to avoid being caught and fined for not having a fishing licence.

Although the men are totally convinced of the need for their wives to go out

fishing with them, women still face considerable difficulties in starting to work catching fish. The difficult economic situation and the problems which afflict that section of the population (alcoholism and drug addiction) make it difficult to find fit and reliable crew. All this makes fishermen keen to have their wives help them with their fishing activities.

Despite this, women still have to face up to the strong machismo widespread among artisanal fishermen. Women brave enough to venture out fishing or to do the work normally done by men are told: "This is men's work, go home and look after your children and do the cooking."

Initially, women find it very hard to enter into fishing. However, after they have been fishing for some time and have earned the respect of their fellows, they gradually gain acceptance and become considered as one of them.

In the past, the maritime authorities would not even consider giving women a licence to fish. Today, they say that they will certainly give licences to any woman who asks for one. Despite this, not one of the women working in fishing today in the *caleta* of Pucusana has a licence.

#### **Women barred**

Several years ago, in the *caleta* of Tambo Mora, women had tried to go out fishing with their husbands as part of the crew.

However, the local maritime authorities put a stop to this, and, in some cases, imposed fines on boatowners who had allowed their wives to go out fishing without a proper licence.

**A** fishing licence would allow women to join professional and social organizations of fishworkers, giving them the right to vote and speak. It would also enable them to gain access to training and formal education, which would enable them to carry out their activities more efficiently.

In the *caleta* of Tambo de Mora, 200 km south of Lima, there are many families who have been engaged for some time in processing saltfish. Fish curing is mainly carried out by fishermen's wives. It started many years ago when, at the end of the day, after the fish sales were over, there was always a large quantity left unsold. As there were no facilities for storing fish, it would spoil. It was, therefore, decided to start preserving fish by curing.

Fish processed by families in this way was used for their own consumption. The methods of washing, salting and sun-drying have been passed down through several generations. Over time, the technique has been improved, so much so that today it is not only the leftover fish that is processed and marketed, but also the fish freshly caught by the men in the family. This activity, which started as a way of conserving fish for family consumption, has gradually increased as women found new markets, which, in turn, has led to an increasing demand.

In this *caleta*, and in the others that were visited, marketing is actively carried out by a large proportion of fishermen's wives. It represents a significant activity for them. Women await the arrival of their husbands on the jetties, ready to start selling fresh fish straightaway. They also go to the local market to look for traders willing to buy from them. It is not only fishermen's wives who engage in this activity, but also their mothers and daughters. They also generate income from other activities, such as selling handicrafts, operating small shops and restaurants, etc. Employment in the processing plants found in various *caletas*

also provides women with an opportunity to earn a small salary (even if they are paid an unfair wage) and contribute to improving their family income.

In the artisanal fishing sector, the work of women in the processing and marketing segments is widely recognized. However, as far as fishing is concerned, women are still highly restricted, equally by the machismo which exists amongst their fellow fishers as by the maritime authorities who will not provide them with licences to fish.

With time and perseverance, the women can overcome this traditional machismo. But, in the short term, the issue of granting licences to women to fish alongside their husbands must be sorted out. Their right to work in any activity in the artisanal fishing sector should be respected. ♣

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