

# Guardians of the Sea

**A meeting of women fishers from five provinces in Thailand led to the formation of a new women's network for defending the rights of fishing communities**

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The meeting was held under challenging circumstances. Women from Phuket and Nakorn Sri Thammarat were not able to raise money on time for their travel. Due to the security situation, women from the provinces of Satun and Pattani could not join. Many had family responsibilities that came in the way of leaving home for even a few days. And yet, despite the odds, 79 women fishers from 27 sub-districts in five provinces gathered in southern Thailand for a four-day meeting between the 17th and 20th of March 2010, called by the Southern Women Fisherfolk Network.

The meeting was a platform for women to share their collective experiences of living and working in small-scale fisheries. The meeting also aimed to address the possibility of setting up a more formal network for women fishers in southern Thailand. Another purpose was to select those who would represent the concerns of Thailand's women fishers at the forthcoming international meeting to be held in early July in Chennai, India.

We begin this report by briefly introducing, province by province, each participating group. The group of women from the province

of Songkhla consisted of women from the Songkhla Lake region and the Gulf of Thailand coastline. The unique ecology of the Songkhla Lake, which supports abundant aquatic and wildlife resources, is threatened today by the construction of a dam at the mouth of the lake. The women fishers from the Songkhla Lake region are struggling to conserve the lake's resources. They are organized into village-level savings groups. The savings not only improve the household economy but also go into a special fund for lake conservation and group capacity building. The women have had some success with setting up community fish-landing co-operatives. The women fishers from the Gulf of Thailand coastline face problems arising from developmental activities in their region, including gas leaks from drilling operations and coastal erosion due to port-related dredging works.

Women fishers from Pattalung Province—southern Thailand's only province that has no marine coastline and is located along a different part of Songkhla Lake—face the same dam construction-related problems that women fishers from Songkhla Province do. In addition, there is the problem of overfishing by large numbers of fishers, both small-scale and commercial.

Another province represented at the meeting was the province of Surat Thani, well-known for its abundant wildlife and natural resources. Bandon Bay, in particular, is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, and also has a large coral reef area. Commercial fishing operations, pollution and waste water from expanding townships, and the development of aquaculture for oyster and clam farming, are serious issues in this region. Large parts of the provincial coastline are privately owned, with aquaculture farms stretching for kilometres on end.

Women fishers from Surat Thani have only recently started getting organized. Their visible role in community affairs is a consequence of growing anxiety over the ongoing degradation of marine and coastal resources. Women understand well that the industrial development projects being planned by the government will irreversibly change the nature of the province's coastline. Worryingly, the government plans for the coastal area of the

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region include the construction of a nuclear power plant.

Women fishers from Trang Province, along the Andaman Sea, have been affected by the growth of commercial fisheries and the use of destructive gear like push-nets and drag-nets, which damage seagrass beds and coral reefs. They also face problems due to marine protection initiatives that involve systems of zonation and fishing restrictions.

The women fishers from Trang Province came together after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami when they found they were being left out of relief and rehabilitation measures. Later, they organized themselves into income-generation groups, to raise money through the sale of products like chilli and curry powder. While they have yet to diversify their activities, they are increasingly being able to participate in community affairs on a more equal footing with men.

Women fishers from the province of Prachuab Kirika along the Gulf of Thailand, not far from Bangkok, face growing difficulties as tourism pushes up fuel and other prices. Commercial fisheries, urbanization, industrialization and tourism have degraded the region's marine and coastal resources. Most small-scale fisherfolk from the province have had to turn to tourism or wage labour for a livelihood. Only a few remain in fisheries. The women of the province rely on community fish-landing co-operatives to get a better price for their fish, and on setting up their own stores for fishing gear and other necessities.

Throughout the meeting there was a conscious attempt to avoid turning it into a training programme. There were no formal presentations. Instead, women shared their experiences and exchanged ideas. Groups of women also worked together on specific issues, so that they could take back concrete experiences of collective learning. To encourage self-reflection, each day began with meditation practice, and, to enable participants to relax after a long day, it closed with games, cultural activities and entertainment.

The women fishers' network from Pum Rieng Village in Chaiya District of Surat Thani Province took charge of conducting the meeting. This took place in a Thai-style *sala* (pavilion) owned by the local administration—not in an expensive, formal setting. At night, participants slept in tents. The responsibility for

each meal was taken up by the groups in turn, and this offered the opportunity of showcasing varieties of traditional local cuisine.

Participants at the meeting discussed issues at two levels. First, the specific issues of each province were discussed. Second, these issues were contextualized in a wider perspective, which took into account the Thai government's plans for the industrial development of coastal areas in accordance with its Southern Region Development Plan, as well as the impact of climate change on coastal livelihoods and ecosystems.

Several issues emerged from the sharing of experiences. One of the most serious related to the degradation of the coastal ecosystem, which has marginalized the small-scale fisheries and curtailed their access to marine and coastal resources. As a result, an enormous sense of livelihood insecurity grips coastal communities. Women are the ones most adversely affected because, apart from the fact that they make vital contributions to fishing and production processes, they are the main caregivers in small-scale fishing communities, responsible for both the food security and the general wellbeing of the household. Women's workloads have increased tremendously but they have few opportunities to participate in the processes and projects that are established to resolve the problems of small-scale fisherfolk.

Women are also expected to conform to traditional stereotypes, and not break out of the mould, for fear of inviting criticism. At the same time, women's work is disregarded and devalued. This causes women to become invisible both within communities and society at large. To establish an identity within the community is not easy, particularly because any sort of decision-making role regarding resource management, conservation and rehabilitation is seen as falling within the exclusive domain of men. Women are often told that the male fisherfolk are already taking care of these matters and so there is no reason for women to get involved. This lack of acceptance is a barrier to women's active participation in fisheries.

There was agreement that while change is necessary, it cannot happen overnight. It would take time and must involve the men of the community. However, for change to occur, the starting point must be self-awareness and a willingness to struggle. No organization, agency or any other external force will be able to bring about equality for women unless women themselves are willing to act.

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Participants also attempted to contextualize the experiences that had been shared in discussions on global warming and aggressive industrialization. All women agreed that communities had been forced to change their fishing patterns significantly over the years, and that their traditional knowledge systems were losing relevance. Inexplicable changes were taking place, like the appearance of new species, coastal erosion and the formation of new coastal land masses. Could these be on account of global warming or were some other forces responsible? Even though fisherfolk are at a loss for explanations, climate change experts agree that the most intense impacts of global warming will occur in marine and coastal areas, acidifying the seas and altering weather patterns and ocean currents. Fishing communities must equip themselves to deal with such phenomena.

There was a detailed discussion on the Thai government's Southern Region Development Plan. Crafted in association with politicians and investors, it aims to heavily industrialize the coastal areas of southern Thailand. Petrochemical industries, energy production, nuclear power plants, logistics and tourism—all except small-scale fishing communities—find a place in the plan. Small-scale fisheries will inevitably be affected in terms of displacement of communities; encroachment into important coastal ecosystems, such as mangrove forests; further degradation of already critically-depleted marine and coastal resources; pollution; and curbing of access and usage rights of small-scale fisherfolk. Significantly, the plan was drafted without a single consultation with small-scale fishing communities, whose lives it will disrupt.

There was consensus that small, piecemeal, single-issue-based efforts were no longer enough; rather, what was needed was a broad and holistic view of the overall context and the need to work for change in an integrated way. Women fishers must work at different levels to deal with the multiple challenges they face. They must work not only within fishing communities but also with other communities and the wider small-scale fisheries movement.

Recognizing this, the assembly formally established a network of groups of women fishers, which was named 'Women's Network for the Defence of Fisherfolk Rights'. This network would develop the role of women in protecting community rights in accessing, using and managing natural resources. It would put in place practices aimed at protecting, conserving and rehabilitating marine and coastal resources to protect the small-scale fisheries, and would increase the knowledge, skills and capacities of women fishers to enable intervention in matters of policy and legislation.

A co-ordinating committee was formed, which included three representatives from each of the provinces; funds were raised through a collection drive; and a working plan was drafted. Two network members—Supapron Pannaria (Network of Women Fisherfolk from Songkhla Lake) and Suphen Pantee (Surat Thani Small-scale Fisherfolk Network)—were selected as representatives to attend the upcoming international women fishers meeting in Chennai, India. The meeting ended with the unanimous view that the four days had been productive and well spent! 🍷