

Gains and challenges

The International Congress of Women in Artisanal Fisheries held in Valparaiso, Chile, highlighted both the gains made by women in the sector and the many difficulties that still lie in their path

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The National Confederation of Artisanal Fishermen of Chile (CONAPACH) organized the International Congress of Women in Artisanal Fisheries in Valparaiso, Chile, from 5-7 June 2013. It was attended by about 150 women of the Chilean artisanal fisheries, numerous male leaders of CONAPACH, government officials, and about 30 others, including fishers as well as technical experts from Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua and Kenya. ICSF supported the participation of fisherwomen from Costa Rica and Brazil and other representatives.

The central theme of the meeting was “integration for sustainable development”, and its two focus areas of discussion—“contribution of artisanal fisheries to food security” and “recognition of the rights of use of fishing resources”—ordered the presentations in the plenary session during the mornings of 5 and 6 June. Working groups met during the afternoons and addressed the following issues: productive experiences of fishing; organizational experiences of artisanal fisheries; effectiveness of the development of the rural sector; environmental and social conflicts in artisanal fishing communities; the new fisheries law in Chile through the experiences of women who participated in the parliamentary process; and the empowerment of fisherwomen.

On 5 June, initial speeches by the Chilean government authorities and CONAPACH leaders were followed by several presentations: Alejandro Flores of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) talked about the ongoing process related to the drafting of the small-scale fisheries (SSF) Guidelines; Alejandro Barrios of IBON International (an international organization that focuses on capacity building of social movements for human rights and democracy), talked about the consequences of globalization for the fishing sector; and Cairo Laguna, representing the Nicaraguan Federation of Fishing and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and

Fishworkers (WFF) discussed the reorganization of the WFF and its focus on the participation of women, as well as the experiences of fishworkers of Central America participating in the negotiations on FAO’s SSF Guidelines. Barbara Figueroa, president of the Central Unit of Workers of Chile (CUT), pointed out the need to align the organization with fishworkers’ issues. She was critical of the commoditized form of the present pension system and emphasized the need to fight for public policies of salaries and gender equity.

Stephan Gelcich, professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, in his presentation titled “Gender and fisheries: challenges in the first mile”, addressed the role of women in Chilean fisheries, especially in the Management and Exploitation Areas for Benthic Resources—marine areas restricted to fisherfolk organizations through the regularization process. An important aspect has been the growth of organizations formed exclusively by women, which, according to Stephan, had an increase of 1200 per cent between 2004 and 2012, emphasizing that women have been actively seeking out the concessions provided for these areas. Among the many issues highlighted in the presentation were the possibilities for income generation for women through adding value to the product and the possibilities of enhancing biodiversity conservation through these initiatives.

The presentation titled “Seafood diet, vulnerability and challenges of the human brain”, made by Victor Gutierrez of the University of Santiago, expounded upon the importance of fish in the human diet for brain development, particularly during pregnancy.

During the afternoon sessions, working groups across different countries met to discuss the productive experiences of artisanal fisheries (Chile, Peru and Guatemala) and the organizational experiences of fishworkers (Costa Rica, Chile and Argentina). This was followed by debates as well as a presentation on the effectiveness of rural sector development.

The plenary session of the morning of 6 June was marked by a long discussion on the new Chilean fisheries law, passed in 2012, which, critics claim, has granted monopolistic privileges to industrial fishing companies, facilitated the transnationalization of fishery resources, established greater control of artisanal fisheries and excluded the indigenous peoples’ access to them. On the one hand, members of the government talked about



There were 150 women members from CONAPACH at the International Congress of Women in Artisanal Fisheries held in Valparaiso, Chile from 5-7 June 2013

the main changes introduced by the law in general, and for the benthic sector in particular, since most of the women's activities are focused on benthic resources. On the other hand, CONAPACH leaders addressed their organization's priority areas during the discussion of the law, highlighting the access regime of the artisanal sector, the records of the fishermen, the exclusive access for artisanal fisheries in the five-mile zone and the rules of the management areas, in particular those referring to the development of small-scale aquaculture.

Scheduled for the afternoon of 6 June were two presentations on the social organization and political role of fisherwomen, one representing Ecuador and the other, Brazil, as well as a presentation by the Peoples Coalition for Food Sovereignty (PCFS). Unfortunately, the presentation of Ecuador did not take place. The case of Brazil was presented by Maria Eliene Pereira do Vale (Maninha), leader of the National Articulation of Fisherwomen (ANP), along with Natalia Tavares, who reported on the experiences of the fisherwomen's organization nationwide, including the advances in their demands, their integration with the Movement of Fishermen and Fisherwomen of Brazil (MPP), and the current struggle of these movements for the regularization of fishing territories. Finally, Pedro Guzmán made a presentation on behalf of PCFS, a network of peasants' organizations, family farmers and fishermen, which originated in Asia and Africa and is now seeking to establish itself in Latin America, with the aim of guiding the discussion on food sovereignty from the perspective of the Southern countries and food producers' communities.

In the few days that it met, the International Congress of Women in Artisanal Fisheries spent considerable time addressing issues of fishing in general, such as legislation and regulatory measures of management, labour and social security, credit and grants policies, as well as environmental problems faced by fishing communities, such as the impact of thermoelectric plants and mining. Unfortunately however, in our opinion, not enough time and focus was devoted to the condition of women in the fishing sector. While it is true that many of the issues in fisheries are, in fact, common to men and women, the form that they take and their impacts are often different and women often pay a greater price.

Discussions on the role of women took place mainly outside the plenary sessions, in the working groups, which discussed the social organization of women linked to production practices, or, in other words, how women have organized themselves for the production and processing of fish, and the difficulties and limitations they face both in general, as well as in relation to men.

The most discussed case regarding women was that of Chile, where it was claimed that men do not let women participate in the meetings of the unions, reporting expulsions and expressing derision during their speeches and in reaction to their demands. Chilean fisherwomen particularly denounced the discrimination they face in gaining access to the Management and Exploitation Areas for Benthic Resources, the main resources they exploit. For instance, Sara Garrido from the Union of Fisherwomen and Seaweed Gatherers of Caleta Coliumo reported the struggle of her union to obtain such a Management Area. The struggle began in 2002 and materialized only in 2008—the delay being due to the prevailing machismo. Such attitudes were seen as an obstacle to women's participation in organizations and the process of gaining approval. Chilean women thus favour an integrated agenda with men and demand the right to participation, inclusion and equal access in fisherfolk organizations.

A striking point in the discussion was that the fisherwomen from Chile were keen to assert that they are not feminists, suggesting thus that feminism was something negative with which they do not want to be identified. This casting of feminism as reverse sexism, as an idea of "paying back with the same coin" or as putting women in a position of superiority and domination over men is, in our opinion, an unfortunate and common misconception, stemming from the lack of

awareness of what feminism really is—the struggle for equal rights and for the end of unequal power relations between the sexes.

In conclusion, while this Congress was, undoubtedly, a valuable initiative of CONAPACH and presented a welcome opportunity for prominent persons, fisherwomen and technicians from other countries to meet and share experiences and knowledge, its chief limitation of inadequate time and energy spent on the question of women perhaps points to the need for more specific and autonomous organization of fisherwomen. For women in the artisanal fisheries, the Congress perhaps reaffirmed the understanding that to defend their rights is to fight against the domination

of men in every space and instance: families, communities, class organizations, governmental institutions and other spheres of society. The Congress, in our opinion, also demonstrated that women in the sector need more information and a better understanding about contemporary women's struggles so as to perceive their own fight (contrary to the view that many fisherwomen currently hold) as truly and genuinely feminist, thus enabling them to learn from the invaluable experiences of others and to integrate their struggles with broader societal struggles. The multiple limits that sexism imposes on fisherwomen weaken both the artisanal fisheries and fishing communities. To overcome this is essential for their defence. ❏

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