

Long Live Women's Day

On International Women's Day on March 8, 2015, women from fishing communities from different parts of the world strengthened their central role in the livelihood struggles of their communities

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For women across the world, March 8 symbolizes the International Women's Day—a day that marks the struggles of women for gaining equality and freedom, for ending gender-based discrimination and violence in all aspects of life, and for a more just and equitable world order. This year, women from fishing communities from different parts of the world marked the day in their own different ways. The following examples, from fishing communities in three continents, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in Asia, Chile from the Americas, and Guinea-Bissau and Uganda in Africa, bring out the different immediate priorities facing fishing women, while stressing the underlying common threads of their struggles.

A large number of fisherwomen and peasant women, wearing traditional dresses and carrying rose petals, thronged lakes and river streams in different parts of Pakistan, and paid tribute to the water bodies on the International Women's Day. The events were part of a 14-day programme of activities, designed by Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) to celebrate the International Day of Action for Rivers. The women showered rose petals and poured water from jars into streams, while praying for the rehabilitation of their rivers from degradation and pollution.

The main event was held on the banks of Narreri Lake. This event brought government officials and community people together to celebrate the International Women's Day under the theme "Women and Water". In the area they gathered, Narreri Lake no longer receives fresh water, and the fisher families inhabiting the area face acute fresh water shortage.

Related events in other areas in the region drew public attention to other pressing issues: the destruction of the Indus Delta, ocean grabbing, water shortage, mass migration of communities from their ancestral abodes to places of safety. The events tried to showcase how people dependent on marine and inland waters today face a livelihood crisis, and how their future generations would face the same, if not worse, if the state continued to neglect their rights.

There are lakes in the area, which once had abundant freshwater, and were able to afford the native communities a decent living. These communities are being forced to migrate for better living and survival of their future generations. They believe that indigenous prosperity and the future of their way of life is related to the restoration of natural water bodies through the free flow of the rivers that constitute the Indus, which is unable to end its flow with natural discharge into the sea. Makal Shah of the PFF said it is not only fishers who face this plight, but also livestock holders and farmers, and maintained that without fresh water to feed the deltas and lakes, ecology itself is in peril. "Habitats of wildlife species have been threatened due to degradation of fresh water lakes and the deltaic region" he said.

In yet another part of South Asia, in Negombo, Sri Lanka, women fishers belonging to the Sri Vimukthi Fisher Women Organization held a public function to observe International Women's Day to which they invited government representatives and members of a local political party. Sri Vimukthi was established in 2000 by a small group of about 15 women whose husbands had been arrested by the Indian coast guard. Since then it has gone on to play a major role in defending rights of fishers in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, across the oceans, in Chile, to mark the International Women's Day, the six women-board members of the National Confederation of Chilean Artisanal Fishers (CONAPACH) issued a joint message to highlight the important contribution made by women workers in the artisanal fishery sector.

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The statement highlighted that although fishing is generally perceived as a man's world, this is changing, thanks to the advances made by women in recent years. Whilst men may make up most of the workforce in seagoing fishery activities, women dominate in shore-based activities. However the overall contribution made by women is difficult to evaluate because official fishery statistics generally don't include women working in the upstream and downstream segments of the fishery chain. For example, women who work as *encarnadoras*, rigging nets, baiting hooks and preparing the gear for fishing, and who process fish, do not appear in any official statistics. Yet without their work, many artisanal fishery operations would not be possible. The Chilean Artisanal Fishery Register records that around 23 percent of the extractive workforce in the fisheries sector are women.

The message further noted that women leaders in CONAPACH comprise just below three percent of the total board members of CONAPACH, reflecting a large gap to be filled if they are to be representative of the number of women in the sector (23 percent), and a much larger gap, if parity with men is the target.

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The Fishermen's House, a hall some 50 m long and 30 m wide, is usually occupied by fishermen just returned from the sea, used for repairing their nets, recounting their tales and mishaps, and resting before returning to sea. However, on the Sunday of March 8, there was no place for any men in the Fisherman's House. More than a thousand women took over the place to celebrate International Women's Day, in the presence of Guinea-Bissau's Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, and Cape Verde Minister in charge of the maritime economy.

The Prime Minister, referring to societal inequality in the past, stressed "We need consensus to promote investment, to build infrastructure to achieve economic independence, to improve the lives of women, youth and our population in general." He added that "Women are the major emergent force in the world. In Guinea-Bissau, thanks to their decisive contribution, their force is

increasing and becoming ever more prevalent. Today, we need the strength of women more than ever, because we need a change of attitude to trace a new future for our youth, honouring our past and those women, who in the 1960s, fought alongside men for our independence."

Thousands of miles from Guinea-Bissau, in East Africa, during the celebrations to mark International Women's Day on March 8, 2015 at Kigezi in Uganda, the President of the country, H. E Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, awarded a medal of honour to Margaret Nakato of the Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT), an organization whose work Yemaya has consistently covered in its pages. On this occasion, a KWDT statement, said: "The significant efforts that Margaret has invested for the last 19 years, in organizing women to be in charge of their development and that of their communities is evidently yielding abundant results as reflected in the lives of rural women in Mukono."

It is important to note that the various commemorations of the International Women's Day this year highlighted the importance of recognising the source of livelihood for coastal communities, while stressing on the important role played by women in the livelihood struggles of coastal people. We may recall here that the origins of the International Women's Day were in the struggles of women workers for regulation of conditions of work. Even today, the struggles of women of fishing communities continue to be for regulation of their working conditions and environment—whether we consider the demand of the women from Pakistan for restoring their rivers and lakes; or of Chile for official recognition of the work done by women; or the fisherwomen of Guinea-Bissau, Benin, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Mauritania, Senegal and Togo for societal equality and economic independence of women. We should also pay heed to the demand, most clearly articulated in the joint statement of the six women leaders of CONAPACH that parity for women has to be achieved even within their organizations, and also within their own homes.

(With inputs from Brian O'Riordan, and from the following websites:

<http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2015/03/10/city/karachi/fisherwomen-celebrate-world-womens-day/>;

<http://rejoprao.info/2015/03/11/la-guinee-bissau-fiere-de-ses-femmes/#more-218>;

and <http://www.nafso-online.org/2015/03/world-womens-day-commemorated-at-negombo.html>)

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