



40 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

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Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

From Sri Lanka to Spain, across the world's coastlines, women form the invisible backbone of fisheries and aquaculture. They mend nets, process catches, gather shellfish, manage households, and keep fishing communities afloat. Yet women enjoy little or no recognition, legal protection, or voice in decision-making processes. As the articles in this issue of Yemaya illustrate, although women's labour sustains families and communities, they remain marginalized by inadequate policy and regressive social norms. In an era of climate crises, ecological decline, and economic uncertainty, this exclusion is not only unjust but threatens the future of the fisheries sector itself.

In Sri Lanka, the vulnerabilities of fisherwomen have long been visible, yet ignored. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated coastal communities, wiping out homes, boats, and livelihoods. Amidst the rubble, it was women's persistent labour that sustained the sector and played a crucial role in community recovery. Women formed self-help groups, rebuilt homes, cared for families, and engaged in informal economic activities. This is despite the fact that they themselves suffered from post-traumatic stress and reproductive health issues, for which there existed no proper help. But in the aftermath of such a catastrophe, their contributions and suffering remained largely invisible in formal rebuilding efforts and policy planning. Strengthening women's organizations and supporting their agency remains vital for building resilience and ensuring they are no longer left behind.

Today, across Sri Lanka, women in fisheries face deep structural barriers. Despite their vital economic roles, from repairing gear to processing and selling fish, they are excluded from cooperatives and resource management bodies, denied access to credit and training, and left vulnerable to exploitation and livelihood insecurity. Their work remains informal and undervalued, their voices absent from decision-making processes, their needs obscured by gender-blind policies. Empowering women's collectives and ensuring their organized participation in decision-making is essential to overcoming these barriers.

A similar pattern can be seen in Galicia, Spain. Although the labour of *mariscadoras* (women shellfish gatherers) is central to coastal economies, yet when environmental disaster struck in 2023, with mass shellfish die-offs driven by climate change and pollution, it was these women who suffered most. Excluded from leadership, they were locked out of negotiations over crisis management. Rigid eligibility rules for social protection left many without income. With shellfish harvesting now unreliable and precarious, many are abandoning the profession, threatening not only their communities' economic foundations but also the sector's long-term sustainability.

These stories, though oceans apart, reflect a global reality. The upcoming 9th Global Conference on Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF9) in Thailand will place this reality at the centre of the conversation. Under the theme "Transforming Aquaculture and Fisheries for Gender Justice," GAF9 recognizes that sustainable fisheries are impossible without women's full inclusion. Gender-sensitive data, targeted policies, fair labour conditions, strong women's organizations, and leadership opportunities for women are no longer optional; they are essential.

From Sri Lanka's post-tsunami recovery to Galicia's ecological crisis, the evidence is clear: when women are excluded, entire communities are left more vulnerable. But when women's voices are strengthened, the fisheries become more equitable, resilient, and sustainable.

The future of global fisheries depends on dismantling systemic barriers and recognizing women not as invisible contributors, but as leaders and essential stakeholders in building resilient coastal economies. Promoting women's agency and supporting women's organising efforts is not just a matter of justice - it is a foundation for the sector's survival. It is time to act; the survival of the sector, and the communities it supports, depends on it. **Y**



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