Yemaya

No. 15 ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES **MARCH 2004**

From the Editor

Dear Friends

This issue of *Yemaya* brings first hand accounts about women of fishing communities from Africa, Asia and the Pacific islands—women who are entrepreneurs, workers, victims of war, and mothers and members of communities.

From South Africa we get a brief report of the public hearings held in August 2003, on the situation of small-scale and artisanal fishing communities in the Western Cape. Ten years after the first free and democratic elections in the country, we hear about how black and coloured members of fishing communities are still struggling for fair and equitable rights to the resource. The author points out that, for many of these communities who were discriminated against during the apartheid regime in South Africa, the introduction of the new rights allocation system is like a second dispossession. That this issue is very much an issue for women as well—women who are responsible for shore-based processing work and for taking care of the family—has been well brought out. It becomes clear that fisheries is not just about production and harvesting, it is as much about shore-based work, and about communities, social networks and a way of life.

From the Pacific islands, we get an interesting account of how sea plants are being used for medicinal and other purposes, providing local women entrepreneurs and healers with a source of income. The author points to the enormous potential of sea plants, as food, as medicine, for health supplements and preventive health care, and for agriculture enhancement.

From Sri Lanka, we hear about the difficult situation of women of fishing communities in war-torn regions of the country, their passionate plea for peace and their willingness to move ahead and work towards healing the wounds of ethnic war.

We would like to take this opportunity to inform you that ICSF has just brought out a dossier titled *Gender Agenda*. This is a compilation of articles on women in fisheries, written by researchers and activists, culled out from past issues of *SAMUDRA Report*, the triannual publication of ICSF. The themes covered are wide ranging and include: conditions of women workers in fish processing plants; the lack of gender disaggregated data in fisheries and the resulting policy implications and biases; the impact of globalization and liberalization processes on women fishworkers; the impact of privatization of resources through the introduction of individual quotas on coastal communities; the extent and manner in which women of fishing communities in the North and South are organizing; the need for a feminist perspective in fisheries, and so on.

And finally, we would like to remind you to send in write-ups for *Yemaya* by end of May 2004.

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Inside Pages

Africa/ South Africa

"Small fry"

A report of the* Fisher People's Human Rights Hearings *in Western Cape, South Africa held in August 2003.

By Jackie Sunde, contract researcher for Masifundise Development Organization, South Africa

Over the past ten years, since the first free and democratic elections were held in South Africa, considerable changes have been made to the policy and legislation governing people's access to, and use of, marine resources. Prior to this, large, white commercial fishing interests had dominated the fishing industry and marine economy. Living on the edge of this highly capitalized, export-oriented fishing industry, and trying to make a livelihood, were thousands of black and coloured small-scale, traditional fishers, some of whom fished for subsistence, but most of whom fished in order to make a very modest income, in addition to putting fish, their staple food, on the family dining table.

Most of the fishers were men; however, women played a central role in the pre- and post- production processes. Some of the fishers worked alone as independent contractors—working on a share basis on other people's boats. A very limited number owned their own small boats. Many of them traditionally harvested a number of different species in order to supplement their livelihoods throughout the seasons.

Common to all of these was the fact that in 1994, they were 'small fry' in a very competitive sea and that prior to this period, there had been no fisheries management system that regulated their fishing activities or promoted their development. However, because of the racially discriminatory laws of the time, they were not allocated fishing quotas for high-value species although some of them were able to obtain permits for line-fishing and beach-nets. Consequently, many of them who did catch the more valuable species such as rock lobster and abalone, were often harassed and prosecuted for fishing illegally.

When Masifundise Development Organization, an independent non-governmental organization (NGO), began working in the coastal towns and villages on the western coast of South Africa in 1999, it was these groups of artisanal and subsistence fishers who came to the organization's attention. Despite the introduction by that time of new legislation to promote equity and transformation in the industry, these fishing communities appeared to be experiencing increasing difficulties in accessing fishing rights, resulting in deepening poverty. In the subsequent four years, Masifundise received numerous reports of fisher's being excluded from the new rights regime. In some cases, they were denied access to the historical rights that they had previously enjoyed and they reported a lack of access to information and justice.

From the anecdotal evidence given to field workers during their weekly visits to these villages, coupled with the presentations made by many fisher people at the Fisher Forum at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, it appeared that the new fishing rights allocation policy, whilst undoubtedly bringing about a degree of transformation in certain aspects of the industry, was continuing to prioritize the access rights of medium- and large-scale commercial interests at the expense of small-scale fishers, many of whom are traditional, *bona fide* fishers.

In order to document these allegations and to provide an opportunity for fisher people to voice their concerns, Masifundise, together with the South African Artisanal Fisher Association, a voluntary community-based fishing association, decided to host *Fisher People's Human Rights Hearings* in the Western Cape on 13 and 14 August 2003. The hearings aimed to gather information about the situation facing small-scale, traditional fishers, to document alleged violations of their human rights, and to use this information to lobby for the rights of these fishers and the introduction of a just and appropriate policy. Central to the objectives was

the intention of understanding how the situation had an impact on the social circumstances of these communities.

For support the organization approached the South African Human Rights Commission, a statutory body, as well as the Anglican Church. Both of these institutions, together with several other NGOs, pledged their support for the Hearings. Masifundise fieldworkers embarked on a preparatory process, travelling from village to village, inviting communities to select a spokesperson to come and speak out at the Hearings. The Hearings were held over two days—the first took place in the city of Cape Town, adjacent to a historically significant fishing harbour and the second, 130 km along the south coast, in the heart of the area where a considerable amount of poaching of abalone has taken place. A press conference was held two days prior to the event, which elicited considerable press coverage. In addition to the 22 community speakers, staff transcribed individual stories of fishers throughout the day. Communities were encouraged to send male and female representatives—however, only five of the speakers were women.

Three keynote speakers were invited to provide background information and to 'set the scene' for the hearings. These included Andy Johnston, a fishing activist who participated in the policy development process, Nick de Villiers, a lawyer from the Legal Resources Centre, who has undertaken research into the rights protecting subsistence and artisanal fishers and Moenieba Isaacs, a researcher who grew up in a fishing village and has recently completed her doctoral thesis on transformation in the South African fishing industry. The input on the international and national legal instruments that provide protection for small-scale fishers was most important in raising awareness about the number of legislation as well as policies that can be used use to defend rights of fishers to access marine resources, to sustainable livelihoods and to food security.

One sea, many issues

The information presented by men and women fishers from coastal communities confirmed the allegations that the current fishing rights allocation policy has a negative impact on the social, economic, cultural and ecological integrity of the small-scale sector and the communities that depend on it. The following complaints were voiced regarding the new policy and its implementation process:

- Lack of adequate access to information on how to apply for fishing rights and the exorbitant cost of the application for fishing rights
- The exclusion of many *bona fide* fishers in the rights allocation process and the allocation of economically unsustainable quotas
- Lack of clear criteria for promoting equitable transformation in the allocation of quotas to previously disadvantaged persons
- Inappropriateness of the Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system as a policy mechanism for accessing rights within the small-scale sector and for the types of fishing undertaken by this constituency
- Failure of the government to consult traditional fishers and to acknowledge the value of indigenous knowledge when making decisions about stocks and allowable catches
- Failure to recognize that traditional methods and gears used by the small-scale sector are, in most instances, more sustainable than those used by large fishing companies
- Overfishing and dumping by big trawlers and government failure to monitor and control this
- Poor labour conditions and the fact that there are no provisions for protecting the small-scale fishing sector in national labour legislation
- Lack of alternative livelihood options for traditional fisher communities, even where setting of Total Allowable Catch (TACs) has limited their access to resources
- Lack of integrated coastal development planning and the marginalization of small, rural and historically disadvantaged coastal communities from many political, economic and social initiatives.

From the stories told, it appears that the impact of the new policy is mediated by numerous factors, including race, gender, education level, the sectors in which fishers have worked, geographical location and their prior access to resources and information. Rural coastal communities, with more limited resources, experience enormous difficulties in accessing information as well as in resisting the dominance of local elites, who might control the financing, processing and marketing opportunities.

The gendered identity of a 'fisher'

Whilst many of the problems identified affect both men and women small-scale fishers, irrespective of the exact

nature of their engagement in the industry, the particular gender relations operating in most of these communities means that women bear the burden of this impact in very specific ways. The historical gendered division of labour and resultant exclusion of women from many aspects of this industry was most apparent at the Fishing Hearings. Whilst it was recognized that women play a significant role in the organization of communities and in the post-harvest processes, men have dominated this industry, and gendered stereotypes regarding the typical 'fisherman' prevailed in the discourse. Although there were men and women speakers, men predominated and tended to talk about 'fishermen' and the impact of the policy on women remained largely hidden. Despite this, notable exceptions were heard:

> "We must actually speak about the 'fisherfolk', because the fisherman goes and catches the fish, but the woman still has to work that fish. She's got to clean it, and cut it up, or whatever. In my mum's days, they didn't wear gumboots. They, they didn't even have aprons in those days. They didn't wear gloves or anything. If you could just realize to stand on your feet from two o'clock in the morning right through till eight o'clock, behind the belt, it has an impact on your legs. Our old people… raised the industry, the fishing industry to what it is today. They used to stand in their own clothing and their own shoes tonight and they get home. The shoes have to dry out. I remember my mum had one petticoat. You may laugh but she's my mum, the one and only. She's got to wash her dress, her one and only dress, and it's got to get dry after fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen hours of standing behind that belt. We've got to recognize the women as well" (Mr. Salie Cyster, Stanford).

Women's reproductive labour was indirectly acknowledged through several references to the fact that it is often women who have to deal with the consequences of not having sufficient income to feed and clothe their families and to pay for their children's schooling. In fishing communities the burden of food insecurity is carried largely by the women.

The economic impact on women

Over and over again, speakers from each community emphasized the enormous economic impact that the lack of adequate access to the sea was having on their economic circumstances. "The government slogan is a better life for all, but, at this stage, we are just poorer and poorer" (Speaker, St Helena Bay).

As many of the women work in the fish processing plants, the allocation of rights to particular communities is critical to the promotion of women's economic survival as well as to maintaining the viability of entire communities. As noted by Ernest from Struisbaai:

> "We are creating jobs for people working in the factory. If we don't catch fish, (the factory owner) can close his factory, because there is no fish. So if we go out to sea the people can start working from half past seven in the morning until the evening".

The number of people in a local community who benefit from access rights was also highlighted by Joao Simoes from Kalk Bay:

> "When we go to sea and get fish, we come to the harbour to sell it. At the harbour the fish gets thrown from the boat onto the quay; then that's when other people employed come in. You get the people that bid a fish for you, then you get the bidders themselves that buy the fish, then you get the fish cleaners that clean the fish for the people that are buying the fish, and then we get the money …50 per cent must go to the boat and 50 per cent comes to us…"

The lack of access to the sea, either through the permit system or the quota system has left many communities facing food shortages and a real lack of food security. For many of the subsistence fishers this means no food on the table at night.

The link between poverty and lack of access to other services such as housing and clinic services in many rural coastal villages was emphasized. Several speakers noted that growth in the tourism industry often had a negative impact on the fishing community. The benefits of the growing tourism industry along the coast are not necessarily being passed on to the small-scale fishers.

> "Langebaan, is now a holiday resort. Fisher people are dying a slow death. We used to pull nets in the past, but that was taken away from us. Now, the holidaymaker comes. You don't even know whether that person has a permit or not, but he is catching so much fish that he is selling the fish to the fish shop so that I go and buy his fish from the shop, whereas I used do it myself" (Norton Dowries).

The social impact on women

"I've been hurt twice in my life time. The first time was in the sixties when District Six was declared a whites-only area, and the second heartache has just arrived now with the fishing industry…"(Stan Dickson, Gansbaai)

For many of these coloured and black fishers who were discriminated against during the apartheid regime in South Africa, the introduction of the new rights allocation system feels like a second dispossession. The social impact has been very extensive and it has hit men, women and children, albeit differently. The social impact is inextricably linked to the economic impact. Facing rent arrears and electricity cut-offs and unable to feed their children, fishermen and women and their families are facing enormous pressures. Given their roles as the primary caregivers in the household, women often carry an additional responsibility in this regard.

"It is a big worry for me that when you walk down the street or you drive down the street, I see many of our people's homes are dark and it really hurts our hearts. Many people have small children and they have to go and look for candles or a little bit of oil …so that they can have some form of light"(Daphne Coraizen, Paternoster).

These social pressures have impacted on the psychological health of fishers. One fisher said: "I am a fisherman, but we have been destroyed…everything has been taken from us. We have been sitting at home for four or five weeks…my problems are so big, I cannot take it anymore."(Ernerst Hammer, Struisbaai). Another said: "It's not right…I have had enough…Do they want us to commit suicide? Do they want us to shoot ourselves?" (Stan Dickson, Gansbaai).

The impact on women, of having a male partner at home for a long period of time, suffering from stress, cannot be underestimated. This was most aptly reflected by Minnie Blauw, who comes from a fishing family:

"When a father loses his right to make a living, such a right being given to the rich companies, that man is being legislatively abused, and such abuse filters through to the wife and children. In the end, women and children are being economically abused …and that is a contradiction in the strong principles of government."

Fishers reported an increase in conflict amongst their communities, often arising as a result of the tensions over the allocation of quotas. Responsibility for managing the conflict often rests on the shoulders of community leaders and members of the fishing committees, who feel ill equipped to deal with it.

"People are asking, `Why is it that those of us who live right by the river or the sea can't catch fish like we did in the past?' and the committee has to explain to these people exactly what the situation is and what the government is expecting from the people about how they are managing that resource. People become difficult. They become angry, and they become angry at the committee members. We are just trying to explain the policies and we don't always have the necessary capacities to explain these policies to the ordinary persons out there." (Speaker from Papendorp).

In most communities, women are actively involved in the committees. The pressures placed on the leaders raise important questions regarding the viability of a co-management approach, being insisted on by the fisheries authorities, in a context such as this, where the policy itself and the exclusion of many of these communities from adequate access lead to increased conflict at the community level.

Many of the fishers made reference to the fact that the current policy has forced them to become poachers or that they may have to poach in future. This has critical implications for the sustainability of the resources as well as for the social and economic life of a community. As one fisher said:

> "Of course, we have to poach. We have to steal crayfish to stay alive. What else are we supposed to do? We've got no rights. They've been taken away from us but we still have to put bread on the table, and we take part in crime to put food on our table for our families. We are, actually, forced to do that." (West Coast).

In some communities, the poachers use children as runners and lookouts. The increase in poaching has attracted outside crime syndicates and, in some areas, there is a close link between poaching, gangsterism, drugs and violence.

The Fisher People's Human Rights Hearings provided an opportunity for men and women fishers from coastal communities to voice their frustrations and to highlight the negative impact of the current fishing policy on their social and economic circumstances. The Hearings have enabled Masifundise to document the specific nature of this impact and this information will now be used for a number of advocacy activities, including launching a legal challenge against the Minister of Environmental Affairs and lobbying the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee responsible for Environmental Affairs.

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Africa/ Benin

Room to Manoeuvre

A recent workshop in Africa explored the coping strategies being adopted by women of fisheries-dependent households

By Elizabeth Bennett of IDDRA, UK Ltd and Kofo Olomu, SFLP, Cotonou

Despite the many studies that have been conducted in African fisheries, much of the work performed by women and the social space they occupy, has remained invisible. This is because most studies concentrate on production (often the primary goal of national fisheries policies), a typically male activity, leaving women out of the picture. Research is also often gender-blind, and researchers simply do not see that women play a role in fishing livelihoods. But perhaps one of the biggest reasons that women remain invisible is that women do not count: data for fisheries rarely distinguishes between male and female activity.

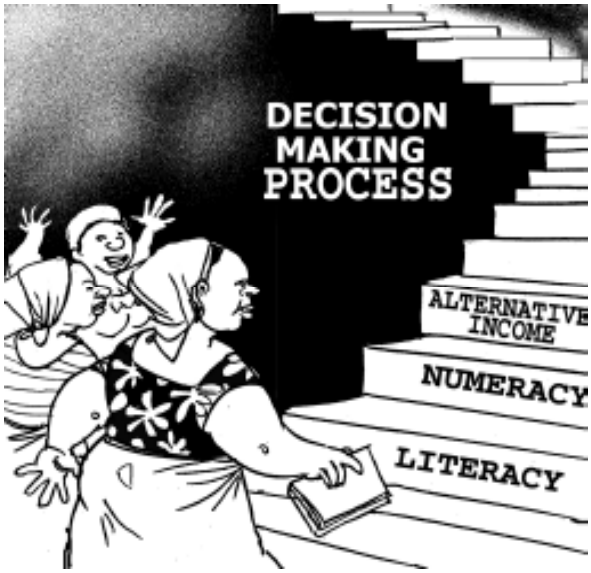
Mindful of these problems, and keen to throw the spotlight on women in fishing communities, a workshop was held in Cotonou, Benin in West Africa in December 2003. The workshop, titled *Room to Manoeuvre: Gender and Coping Strategies in the Fisheries Sector*, was funded by the European Commission and was organized by IDDRA UK and the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP), based in Cotonou. The workshop brought together 14 participants from Europe (France, Madeira) and Africa (Guinea, the Gambia, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, and Tanzania). Participants represented fisheries organizations, universities, research, administration, development, and non-governmental organizations.

The workshop had two objectives: first, to highlight the roles and social space occupied by women in the fisheries sector; and, second, because so little is known about how female roles are changing, to explore how these women formed coping strategies to deal with the changes that are affecting the sector.

There is little denying that fishing is a precarious occupation and success is often dictated by elements beyond the control of the community. But it would appear that the present generation believes it is facing more challenges of greater magnitude than their forebears. These challenges come not just from smaller catches and increased competition for fish, but from worsening social and economic conditions, increased globalization, environmental problems such as pollution, floods, drought and coastal erosion, and HIV/AIDS that is particularly affecting communities in West Africa. These challenges are not unique to Africa, nor are they unique to fishing. They are problems that surface in all continents and are associated with poverty in many other sectors too.

So how are women in fishing-dependent communities in West Africa coping with these challenges? Through a series of presentations and discussions, the workshop found that they have adopted a wide variety of methods of meeting these new challenges. Women are using traditional ways of generating alternative income through micro-enterprise ventures (beer brewing and small-scale aquaculture, for example) but, more interestingly, they are seeking to improve their knowledge base so that they can run their businesses better. They are taking up the literacy and numeracy skills training being offered by NGOs and, not only are

they using these skills to improve their income generation, but to gain improved access to the fisheries management decision-making process. Despite the critical link between the catching sector and the processing sector, women rarely have any input to the management process. Above all, women are seeking ways to strengthen their support institutions: to ensure that their organizations are able to run effectively and help them in times of need. As we might expect, credit schemes are being widely used to ease the burden of dips in income, but it was argued that men are in greater need of access to credit than women.



Although there are clearly several coping strategies in operation, many West African communities come up against structural and financial barriers—like limited access to credit and lack of institutional support for women's organizations—which prevent these strategies working effectively. To help solve this problem, the workshop concluded that there was an acute need for improved institutions. Organizations are often an important entry point for development initiatives, and the degree of capacity of the organizations will have a likely impact on the success of any development initiatives and their uptake. Institutions are often ignored in development projects, but the workshop showed that, in fact, many benefits could be derived from strengthening this vital set of structures within communities.

Further information on the workshop can be found in the SFLP Bulletin: *www.sflp.org/eng/007/pub1/index.html*.

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Pacific Islands

A sea of options

Sea plants offer a promising option for women in coastal communities to develop small businesses

By Irene Novaczek, a Canadian marine biologist and community development facilitator who has been working in the South Pacific since 1999.

Marine plants have been used as medicine, especially in Asian countries, for centuries. The high degree to which sea plants are used as food by Japanese people is believed to contribute to the relatively low incidence of heart disease and some cancers in that country. In 1999, while travelling around the Pacific Islands, I noted that in that region, sea plants are not used as medicine by the herbalists who provide many rural health care services. Outside of Fiji, where half a dozen species are eaten and sold in the market, there is also relatively little use of sea plants as food. Although in other parts of the world seaweeds are prized as valuable organic fertilizers for home gardens, this use is also not evident in the Pacific.

As a marine scientist with a doctorate in marine botany, I have become convinced that to ignore the value of marine plants is to miss out on many opportunities for sustainable community development. According to recent scientific findings, many diseases and conditions may be prevented or alleviated through the use of these plants. One can expect different sea plant preparations to be useful for basic home first-aid (constipation, diarrhoea, cuts and burns). There are also published studies that show that sea-plant extracts can be used as preventive medicine for heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes and viral infections, and can strengthen the immune system generally. There is folkloric information on use of sea plant extracts for lung conditions, colds and flu, and sexual dysfunction. Some sea plant extracts have potential for prevention and/or treatment of some viral infections (dengue, HIV, herpes) and parasites (malaria). Others have been clinically proven as effective ingredients in skincare products. Finally, sea plants are a source of vitamins and minerals, especially micronutrients.

Marine plants would, therefore, appear to be a valuable resource, especially for food on atolls, where agriculture is difficult, and for preventive health care on small islands, where access to Western medicine is limited.

Small businesses based on the careful harvesting and value-added processing of marine plants is a development option that has received scant attention, yet has great potential both for domestic and export markets. There is a vibrant and expanding international market for marine plants as health food and also as ingredients in fine cosmetics and health spa treatments. Although exporting sea plant products may be uneconomic for many small Pacific Island businesses, there are clearly opportunities to provide products and services to tourists, thus "exporting" the products without having to worry about transportation costs and trade restrictions.

In 2001-2003, I worked in the Pacific region developing and delivering training workshops on the use of sea plants for food, agriculture enhancement, medicine and income generation. Village people, NGO staff and government staff were introduced to the various uses of sea plants in the course of two workshops in 2001. In 2002, three booklets were published. *Sea Plants* is an overview of how to find, harvest and use marine plants. *A Guide to the Common Edible and Medicinal Sea Plants of the Pacific Islands* provides pictures, descriptions and other information on 34 genera of tropical seaweeds. *Sea Vegetable Recipes for the Pacific Islands* includes recipes for a wide array of sweet and savoury dishes that can be used for family food or market products.

Next, a workshop was developed with the explicit aim of providing information, skills and support to selected women who might develop small businesses. Seven trainees flew in from PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa and Kiribati to work with several Fijian trainees and me at USP. Most of the trainees were traditional healers. One was a seaweed farmer and one already had a small business in herbal cosmetics. The response of these women to information on sea plants was strong and positive.

Alice Athy in Vanuatu now has a vibrant business, with natural therapy clinics in Port Vila and Santo, employing more than 10 people. Liviana Madanavatui now has a successful small business in Suva, Fiji, selling sea-plant based cosmetics, tonics and other preparations. Minnie Bate in PNG has developed a sea-plant product line to add to her existing herbal business. Some of my trainees are still in the early stages of business development; most require follow-up assistance.

These preliminary efforts have proven that women who have the entrepreneurial spark can be effectively trained to develop or diversify small businesses using underutilized sea plant resources. The start-up capital requirements are minimal and the women report positive satisfaction with being able to produce and sell products that are beneficial to people's health. Because women are the primary fishers in shallow waters where sea plants grow, expansion of these businesses will also benefit women in rural communities who can harvest, clean and dry a range of local sea-plant resources and gain income by supplying herbalists and other female entrepreneurs.

I have found that workshops targeting women in villages, fisheries officers and NGO staff have borne fewer tangible results in terms of stimulating local economic development or improved healthcare. NGO and government field workers will not pass on information unless they have a budgeted programme that allows them to develop training programmes. Also, most people do not have the energy and ambition required to be an entrepreneur, or the gift to be a healer. However, with follow-up assistance from NGO's and government extension officers, coastal villagers could benefit from diversification of their food sources, home remedies for simple ailments, and from the use of sea plants to improve the yields from gardens.

Communities engaged in seaweed cultivation for export should also look at their options for capitalizing on this resource through local processing and use, for example, the manufacture of cosmetics, health products and agricultural aids.

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Asia/ Sri Lanka

Stars in the dark

The story of Shaila, a widow struggling for survival in a war-torn area in northern Sri Lanka

By Herman Kumara of National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO), Sri Lanka

Shaila Idayaraj, her mother and her five-year old daughter are live examples of what and how 20 years of war—a war that is still not over—have contributed to Sri Lankan society. The situation of the people in Jaffna and their stories of survival amidst the cruel war are so painful, as revealed by the parentless children, widows, armless civilians, and displaced people we met when we visited Jaffna peninsula. We witnessed for ourselves how the war has affected the lives of people in war-torn areas. The high security zones (HSZs) have severely threatened the life and livelihoods of people. Farmers have lost cultivable lands. Fisherfolk face tight restrictions in accessing the sea. And, very specifically, it has affected people like 26-year old Shaila Idayaraj, of Sawalkattu fishing village in Jaffna peninsula, in northern Sri Lanka, who have lost the breadwinners of their families.

Can you imagine a situation where you have lost your father, your grandfather and your husband as a result of civil war and you do not even have a death certificate to claim compensation? Of course, if you are the wife of a politician, you have every possibility to succeed your husband in parliament or even in the provincial or regional councils. But if you are a wife of a small-scale fisherman, what would be your position?

Perhaps you are strong enough to bear such a situation. But when your culture, your religion, your relatives and the society as a whole does not recognize you as a *woman*, because you are a widow, do you think you could still survive? Shaila, has already gone through all these difficulties, though she is just 26 years old, but she still has the perseverance to survive, at least for the sake of her daughter. This is Shaila's story:

Life was very hard for people in Jaffna during the1980s when war was raging in the area. The lives of women were more threatened. The first shock in Shaila's life was when her father was killed in 1987, by peacekeeping forces, when she was only 10 years old. Amidst these severe troubles her mother tried to send her two children—a son and daughter— to school, but could not manage it with the low income she received from selling *beedis*. Her income was just enough to feed the children.

The only alternative was for Shaila to leave school at a very early age and marry her brother-in-law. However, a greater disaster befell her when her husband was killed by the armed forces just two years after she was married. Her husband was fishing at sea when his boat was fired at on 15 September 1996. He and four other fellow fishermen were instantly killed. Their bodies were not found at first, but later, the headless bodies were identified and buried in a common pit. Shaila could recognize the dead body of her husband, but, to date, she has not been able to obtain a death certificate.

A death certificate is needed to claim compensation from the government or any support agency. That is the basic legal document that recognizes you as a war victim. Though Shaila was not able to get this document, she had the will to survive for the sake of her daughter, her most precious resource at that time. But the society was so cruel to a widow, refusing to accept such a woman as a human being, completely marginalizing her, not wishing to see her face, or to invite her for important social events. Life was hard as Shaila struggled to survive without her husband and her father.

According to Shaila, there were several occasions when she felt like committing suicide because of the way she was treated by society. But, as a woman with the responsibility of feeding her daughter and her old widowed mother, she somehow found the courage to continue living. Even as Shaila was still struggling, she faced her third shock—her grandfather was killed,

again by the armed forces. She has no tears left any more—only the awareness that she needs to continue her struggle.

It is not only Shaila who has faced such a destiny in this war-torn area. In Sawalkattu village alone around 96 women have lost their husbands or the breadwinners of their families due to war. According to available information, there are around 20,000 widows in Jaffna peninsula. But these women cannot go to sea to earn a livelihood the way their husbands did. Most of them are between 22 and 56 years of age. The women of Sawalkattu have found the courage to get together to form a women's group—the Star Widow's Association—which has initiated small savings for a start, to put together capital to begin some small business.

When we visited them, the group was engaged in the production of handicrafts from *palmyrah* leaves, preparation and sale of pickles, preparation and sale of breakfast items, and collection and sale of firewood. These are some of the self-help programmes that have been initiated by the association. Shaila, the main actor of the story, is the chairperson of the association, a post for which she bears more than enough qualifications.

When we asked the women's group whether they are ready to undertake labour-intensive activities, typically categorized as men's work, such as carpentry, mechanical activities, three-wheel driving, etc., the group was open to the idea. They had no more fear left of society, they said, recalling how they had been treated so badly. As we are in the process of healing the wounds of ethnic crisis today, it is very educative to hear Shaila's voice. It gives a very strong message to the majority Sinhalese people in the south on how the war victimized Shaila and others in the Star Widow's Association in Jaffna.

We asked the group: "How do you feel when Sinhalese people come to you and ask you about your life situation, even when this community may be considered to be responsible for your present hardship?" The group was very articulate about their situation and their reality. Shaila responded on behalf of the group: "We do not have any anger against the Sinhalese people in the south. They are not responsible for the situation. Only opportunistic politicians are responsible for the situation. We know the reality and we need your support to have a decent life here. We have lost our lands, our water, and even our own houses, as our lands have been occupied by the military. We live in refugee camps. As we are in the High Security Zone, our people cannot go for fishing. As members of the Star Widow's Association, we cannot buy fish for our survival. Because of land mines, our fertile lands are useless. We have no opportunities to work as labour in agricultural fields. That make our life situation even more difficult. Our life and peace are not two separate things. We need peace to live in harmony. Please help us to make peace".

It is so important to see the courage of these women, in the absence of the family breadwinners, amidst the tight security situation. It is difficult to imagine that the members of this association are today ready to help heal the wounds of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lankan society.

How can we help not only Shaila's group but also Sri Lankan society as a whole, which is suffering from war in the North as well as in the South? We think Shaila and the members of her association have given us the most important message on how we should move forward in this difficult situation.

(Shaila's Story was compiled during the visit by NAFSO and the Kantha Shakthi team to Jaffna in February 2004)

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Asia/ Sri Lanka

We like it here

A visit to a prawn processing plant in Puttalam district, Sri Lanka, provides a brief glimpse into the lives of those who work there

By Cornelie Quist, a member of ICSF

Sumeethra and Mala are both workers in a prawn processing plant of a company that exports to Japan and Europe. I was invited inside the plant after having introduced myself as a researcher working in the prawn industry of the Netherlands. With Sumeethra I spoke in the presence of the plant manager and with Mala, only briefly during her ten minutes lunch break. Both women have enjoyed higher education, are ambitious and are not married. Here are their stories.

The company where the two women work is situated in the centre of the prawn cultivation (aquaculture) area of Sri Lanka, in the Puttalam district on the west coast. It started operations in 1999, when the prices for processed prawn were at their peak in the world market. The company is a partner in the Hock Bee Group, which has its head office in Singapore and is one of the six export companies in Sri Lanka qualified to export to the European Union (EU). The company falls under the Free Trade Zone regulations, which means that it not only enjoys privileges such as duty-free import of equipment and raw materials, but also that the national labour laws are not applicable to workers here. The company has 250 employees (230 women and 20 men), most of whom are casual workers.

Sumeethra is a microbiologist and, as production controller, she is responsible for ensuring that the quality of processed prawn meets standards such as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) required for exporting to Europe and some other countries. She tells me that she is very happy with her job, because she finds it very interesting. She also likes to work in a modern company and she finds it a real challenge to ensure that the product qualifies for export to the EU. The prawn that they process are cultured and supplied by prawn farmers in the area, but they also obtain wild prawn from fishermen of northern Sri Lanka (Jaffna). They process two to four tonnes per day.

Unfortunately, the supply of local prawn has declined in the last few years, one reason being the white spot disease that has destroyed practically all prawn farms in Sri Lanka. The other reason is the difficulty in transporting the wild prawn catch from the north because of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). Sumeethra says that her company is now thinking of importing prawn from India and Bangladesh for reprocessing into higher value-added products, and further research on this is being undertaken.

She agrees that it could be better if the company would process Sri Lankan prawn and, in particular, prawn obtained from the same district, one of the poorest in the country. However, it is unfortunate that the Sri Lankan government has no policy to regulate aquaculture. In a poor district like Puttalam this led to a gold rush mentality and a boom in prawn cultivation, most of it by untrained and inexperienced cultivators. These were primarily poor folk attracted by the high prices in the world market for prawn, hoping to strike it rich in a short time. Unplanned and unregulated prawn farming not only resulted in disasters like the white spot disease, but also led to environmental problems arising from the destruction of mangrove forests, pollution of the lagoon and salinity of the soil. Sumeethra said she feels very concerned about this, but she also feels that her company cannot do anything about it because it operates in a free market.

Challenging my critical questions, Sumeethra says that the EU standards are not very realistic for countries like Sri Lanka. The investments are too high, particularly now that the prices for processed prawn in the world market are declining rapidly. She was of the opinion that the Japanese were less demanding in this respect. I show her a promotion film on CD of a Dutch prawn processing and exporting firm in the Netherlands. While seeing the super-modern production and marketing technology she heaves a deep sigh that makes me feel guilty.

Sumeethra then gets the permission of the manager to show me the production room of her processing plant. For reasons of hygiene, I can only watch the workers from behind a glass wall. The majority of workers are young women who, clad in white uniform and boots, work standing in a long row. Some are separating prawn by size and quality; others are packing the separated prawn. The few young men workers only carry boxes between the refrigerated production room and the cold store. All work is done manually.

While leaving the plant, we pass a small room near the entrance where some workers are having their lunchbreak. Through the window, I greet them and they invite me inside. They are excited to talk to me and offer me some of their lunch. I take a piece of mango and ask if they like to work in this company. Yes, they do, they say.

They tell me that all workers are from the area. One of the workers, her name is Mala, says that she has been working here for three years. She is one of the 80 permanent workers. The other 170 are all casual workers. Mala, a high school graduate, says that she is happy with her job because there is lot of unemployment in this area. I ask her what type of career she can expect in this company. She answers that good workers have the chance of becoming permanent after they finish a six-month contract, and, thereafter, a few of them can become supervisors. Is that it, I ask?

The usual working hours are from 8 am to 5 pm, she continues, but most workers hope to do overtime and work over the weekends as well. The basic salary is Rs3,000 per month (about Euro 30), but this can go up to Rs5,000 or more, because of overtime. She says that some workers even do a 100-hour working week! However, this is an exception now because of inadequate supply of unprocessed prawn. I ask her if the type of work she does is not heavy, in particular the long hours of standing in the cold temperature. She says that women like this type of work and she makes a move to go back to the production room. Her ten-minute lunch break is over.

(With thanks to the National Fisheries Solidarity of Sri Lanka for their help in making these interviews.)

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Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We would also like names of other people who could be interested in being part of this initiative. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.

Writers and potential contributors to *YEMAYA*, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer