



28 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers

Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

March 8, or International Women's Day, is an occasion for women across the world to gather in solidarity to mark women's ongoing struggles for equality, freedom, dignity and a violence-free life. For more than a hundred years, ever since the historic protests of New York's garment workers forced the commemoration of this important day, March 8 has also been an occasion for women on their long road to freedom to take collective stock of gains made and setbacks suffered, and to plan ahead. As examples from across the world in this issue of Yemaya illustrate, so it is in the case of women in fishing and coastal communities, whose lives are a daily testament to the spirit of struggle and resilience underlying International Women's Day.

On the occasion of March 8, it is fitting to honour women activists like Tahira Shah and Chandrika Sharma whose lives were spent ceaselessly championing the rights of small-scale fishworkers, particularly women, across the world. The life of Tahira Shah, the militant leader of the Pakistan Fisher Forum, who passed away recently, was a testament to struggle—struggle that began with fighting the shackles of conservatism within her natal family, and continued throughout a life dedicated to improving the lives of Pakistan's small-scale fishers.

March 8 this year also marks a year since the disappearance of the flight MH370 with ICSF's Executive Secretary Chandrika Sharma on board. Ever committed to the principles of gender justice, Chandrika believed that "if our aim is to valorize the artisanal fisheries sector, by the same logic we will have to work to valorize the role of women in the sector and the vital contribution of nature and its services to the life and livelihood of fishing communities." Commemorating her invaluable contributions to the drafting of the Voluntary Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), a recent workshop in Chennai on the SSF Guidelines urged that these be implemented with the same principles of "commitment, correctness, and consciousness of the great cycle of life" that Chandrika espoused.

Activists like Tahira and Chandrika were deeply conscious that the full consequences of the chronic official neglect of the small-scale fisheries are borne primarily by women. Women in the sector lead uncertain lives without secure livelihoods. They face regular harassment from the State, as the case of the fisherwomen of Kultali in the Sunderbans in India shows. Their livelihood sources are polluted and degraded by commercial interests, while the government turns a blind eye to the rule of law, as evident from the examples from Pakistan. In Chile, as in most countries, women in the fisheries, for the same jobs, earn less than men, while the official non-recognition of certain types of female labour disbars benefit claims. March 8 is an occasion for us to renew our pledge to end such realities and forge new paths of autonomy and hope.

The struggles for livelihood freedom tell only a part of the story. A vital struggle for women is for parity within their organizations, and also within their own homes, as articulated by the women leaders of CONAPACH in Chile. The struggles of women within homes, organizations, and with the outside world, all help weave a net of feminist consciousness that supports women and enables them to build powerful and effective organizations at every level to fight for their rights. ■



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