

Latin America/ Chile

Women Weaving Networks

Women fishworkers in Chile meet to discuss issues of common concern

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The First Meeting of Women in Artisanal Fisheries: Northern Zone was held in Antofagasta, Northern Chile from 27 to 29 June 2001. Thirty seven participants from 14 women's groups belonging to all three zones of Chile—northern, central and southern—engaged in fishing, aquaculture, baiting hooks, processing and marketing fish, participated in this meeting. Nine of these groups were from the northern region. The event was organized by women members of the *Sindicato de Buzos Mariscadores* (Syndicate of Shellfish Divers) of the *caleta* Constitución–Isla Santa Maria, a part of the National Network of Women in Artisanal Fisheries of the National Confederation of Artisanal Fishers of Chile (CONAPACH).

Various public service organizations of Region II as well as officials from the central level participated in this meeting. This included officials from Sernapesca, Dirección de Obras Portuarias, (Port Works Management) Sercotec, Sernam and the UECPS (Unidad Coordinadora del Ministerio de Obras Públicas or the Co-ordination Unit of the Ministry of Public Works). They expressed their support towards the ideas put forth at the meeting.

This meeting was part of the project "Women weaving networks for the sustainable future of our *caletas*", being executed by CONAPACH with financial support from the *Fondo de las Américas*. Earlier this year, in January, women from the artisanal fisheries sector in Chile had organized themselves into a National Network and selected co-ordinators for each zone. The members of the Network have since been meeting regularly, every two months, to discuss strategies to strengthen, broaden and consolidate this movement. They have worked out zonal plans to identify new women's groups, deepen ties with those already in contact with the network, disseminate information on work being carried out by the network as well as identify sources to fund the initiatives of the movement and grassroot groups.

This meeting in Antofagasta was a product of these zonal-level projects. It was the largest event that the National Network of Women has ever organized and marks a milestone for the co-ordinators of the northern zone and for the CONAPACH Women's Network. It was an important step towards valorizing the role of women in artisanal fisheries.

Women discussed their expectations from the workshop and how these could be integrated into the work plan of the network. They elaborated on the concept of 'sustainable development' and formulated guidelines for 'community, economic and environmental development'.

They gave practical suggestions for achieving concrete results in their respective *caletas*. They suggested creating permanent channels of communication between their organizations. There was a strong sentiment in favour of holding more such meetings in future as a concrete step towards increasing communication between groups, leading to a strengthening of the movement. They stressed the significance of the Network of Women, the need to strengthen it and to elect more representatives to ensure better co-ordination.

Gender issues were approached within the context of legitimizing *caletas*, and recognizing that these comprised groups of both men and women. The need for women to develop their self-potential and power was stressed, and to ensure this it was proposed that new opportunities for sharing and analyzing experiences and learning from the experiences of others, be created.

The women also drew the attention of authorities to illegal fishing by the industrial sector in the 5-mile zone reserved for artisanal fishing. It was evident that even if women from the northern zone, in general, are not closely integrated into the activities of *sindicatos*, they are well informed about at least two major issues: the 5-mile zone and the fisheries law. Their interest in protecting resources, in respecting the closed seasons and in getting better prices, demonstrated their appreciation of problems arising from overexploitation of marine resources.

In the field of community development they highlighted the need for better organization into groups and for establishing alliances with other community-based as well as environmental organizations. They also proposed efforts towards influencing public opinion about problems faced by their communities, through the the media.

Women stressed the need to address various problems they faced in their *caletas*. These included: poor accessibility of *caletas*; lack of transport, affecting especially school-going children who need to travel to their schools; lack of proper sewage and drinking water facilities; and poor access to health services. They stressed the necessity for providing decompression chambers for divers exposed to pressure-related problems and a high accident rate. They also stressed that in *caletas* where there are no medical facilities, men and women need to be trained to provide first-aid to victims of accidents. The women expressed concern about the significant number of children who drop out of school or repeat academic years and highlighted the need for nursery and other schools.

Women proposed two broad areas for environmental action. First, they stressed the importance of promoting citizen's participation through the efforts of neighbourhood groups, schools and unions, and with the involvement of CONAPACH, Servicio País, and the authorities, towards finding solutions to their problems. They emphasized the need to keep the community informed through the use of various media.

They also proposed other alternatives for environmental improvement including recycling of organic and inorganic waste, developing green belts, controlling pollution (waste water, heavy metals, dregs etc), effectively enforcing the closed season and protecting resources (size and quality), and promoting environmental awareness.

In conclusion, this meeting of women in artisanal fisheries in the northern zone was perhaps a landmark in developing new perspectives in the artisanal fisheries sector, in general, and in efforts towards increasing the visibility of women, in particular. Through our efforts all over the country it has been possible to observe the situation of women in the sector. Although it is a fact

that women are the most marginalized in terms of direct participation in artisanal fisheries in the northern zone, what is noteworthy is that they do understand the role they play in the development of the sector. This assures us that it is possible for development initiatives for women in the sector to succeed.

We think it important to support women through strengthening their incipient organizations and supporting their plans for socio-economic development. This must be done based on an integrated plan. In the past, although the intention has always been there on the part of the authorities to elevate the role of the female 'actor', the efforts have, for the most part, been disjointed and based on isolated activities rather than on an integrated approach to development. The women from the northern sector of the country require support in their activities, along with their partners—husbands, fathers, companions etc.

It is clear to women that the issue of their integration into the sector is generally glossed over by the predominantly male organizations. We believe that we are now at a juncture where there is a strong possibility for success on an issue which is highly complex. During this meeting women suggested several development projects, directed towards *sindicatos* and the various public services of Region II. We are inviting these bodies to form a working platform that could help us in defining strategies and concrete opportunities for the integration of women.

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