

Present but hardly represented

Women who dominate the shellfish harvest sector in Galicia struggle for due representation and policy inclusion

By **Sandra Amezaga** (s.amezaga@udc.es), PhD Student, University of A Coruña, Faculty of Sociology, Spain and Secretary, Women Salgadas-Galician Association of Women of the Sea, Spain

On the North-Western region of Galicia in Spain, shore-based shellfish harvesting is carried out mainly by women. With traditional and very simple tools that have remained virtually unchanged over time, women gather in beaches to collect bivalve molluscs, primarily species of clam (japonica, babosa and fina), cockles and razor clams. The strong presence of women in the trade has profound implications, both positive and negative, which determine its main characteristics.

According to the latest official data provided by the Galician regional government there are 3,529 people holding an official license for shore-based shellfish harvesting in the region, of which 2,633 are women and 896 men.

On the Arousa Bay, the main hotspot for shore-based mollusc harvesting, there are 1,544 licence holders, of which 306 are men and 1,238 women.

Even though the total number of shellfish harvesters in Galicia has decreased from 3,970 people in 2011 to 3,529 in 2023, in recent years the number of male licence holders has significantly increased, profoundly changing the male to female ratio. In 2011, women represented 90 percent of all licence holders but in 2023 only 75 percent. Despite the decline, the trade remains predominantly female, in sharp contrast to other fishing activities where women are practically absent, such as fishing, where, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Government of Spain, they barely represent 6.15 percent of the total.

All small-scale fishing activities, such as fishing, and shore-based and vessel-based shellfish gathering (locally known as “on foot” and “on board” harvesting), are grouped together in Cofradías de Pescadores (Fishermen’s Guilds), non-profit legal entities consulted by and collaborating with the Galician administration in matters related to extractive fisheries and fishery management. The Xunta de Galicia (Regional Government) regulates the Guilds. There are currently 63 of these in Galicia, present in all three coastal provinces (Pontevedra, Coruña and Lugo). They all have the following legal governance structure vide Decree (8/2014):

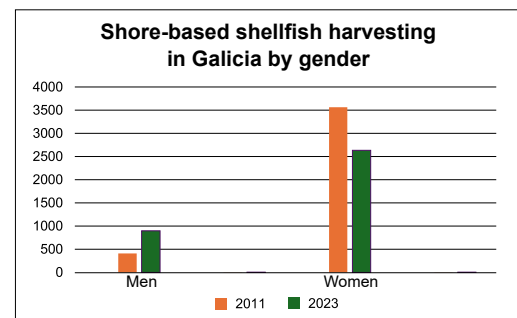
A General Board, which this is the main decision-making and governance body, overseeing all the others, and includes between 10 and 24 members (depending on the Guild’s number of partners) representing all production sectors.

A Council, which oversees general management, administration and government. It consists of the Chief Officer, the Secretary and 6 to 10 members (depending on the number of members of the General Board)

A Chief Officer who is the Guild’s representative and Chair of both the Council and the General Board.

The Chair and the members of the Executive Committee are elected from the General Board’s membership.

According to data from the Galician Federation of Fishing Guilds, women make up 32.88 percent of all guild members in the region. However, their presence and participation in the governing bodies is far from equal. After the last elections to leadership positions in October 2022, only three guilds have female Chief Officers. These are the Cofradías from Vigo (Vigo bay, Pontevedra Province), Lourizán



Source: Chart prepared by the author with data from the Galician Institute of Statistics (IGE)

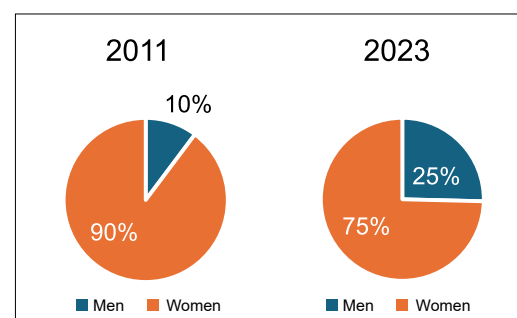


Chart: prepared by the author from IGE data

The transformation of shore-based shellfish harvesting and progress towards greater equity and inclusivity necessarily requires a review of current leadership models both in fisheries and in society

(Pontevedra bay, Pontevedra Province) and O Grove (Arousa bay, Pontevedra Province). In other words, women make up 32.88 percent of all guild members but are represented in only 4.76 percent of leadership positions in the main small-scale fisheries organisations in Galicia.

The sheer inequality between men and women becomes even more worrying when comparing those figures with the results of previous elections held by the guilds. In 2014 a total of 13 women were elected as their associations' Chief Officers. Four years later, that figure decreased to six until finally in the last elections, in October 2022, only three women were voted to occupy these senior posts.

On upper governance levels, there has never been a woman at the helm in the provincial or regional federations. Clearly, a strategy is needed to reverse this downward trend in terms of women's participation, not in fishing or shellfish harvesting where they continue to be present in large numbers but in decision-making. The lack of gender parity in fisheries governing bodies exacerbates fisherwomen's historically precarious work and living conditions. The traditional gender segregation of fishing activities leads to the acute vulnerability of female-dominated sectors, such as shore-based, "on foot", shellfish harvesting. Men run the fisheries in Galicia and, despite the economic and social importance of shellfish harvesting in the region, women are outside decision-making spaces where fisheries regulations are negotiated. For example, until last year, different reduction coefficients were used to calculate retirement pensions in shore-based and vessel-based shellfish harvesting. The Law on Sustainable Fisheries and Fisheries Research, adopted on 17 March 2023, finally aligned the two groups' reduction coefficient (0.15), while recognising the same entitlement to other trade categories, such as neskattillas – the female relatives of the fishermen, who help unloading, processing and marketing fish; net menders; empacadoras – the fish handlers; and professional divers. These newly included categories, except for professional divers, are made up mostly of women.

The federations of fishing guilds, represented by their Chairs, have been designated necessary partners by the Regional Government of Galicia to negotiate regulatory frameworks, state aids or labour-related matters. If women are not present at decision-making levels, the issues and challenges they face are neglected by policy. As an example, the annual renewal of licenses in shore-based shellfish harvesting, a female-dominated activity, is conditional on the licence

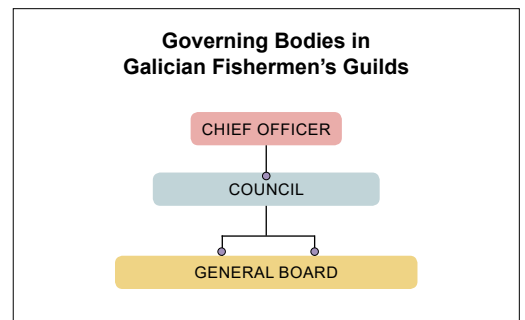
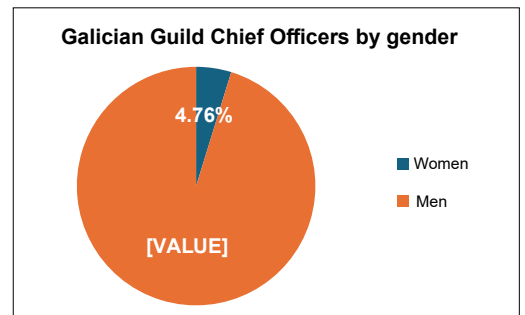


Chart: prepared by the author with data from Decree 8/2014



Chart: prepared by the author with data from Decree 8/2014



Pie Chart: own elaboration

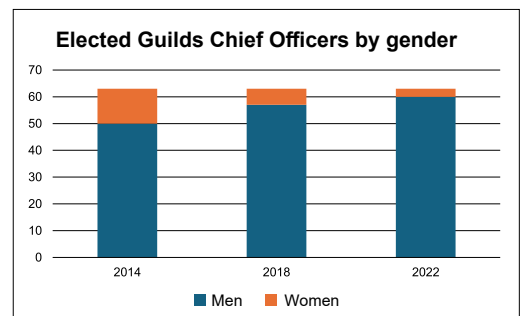


Chart: prepared by the author

Men	percent	Women	percent
8,162	67.12 percent	3,998	32.88 percent

Table: prepared by author with data from the Galician Federation of Fishing Guilds

holder's participation in seaweed removal and surveillance against illegal harvesting. This contrasts with the renewal of licenses for vessel-based licences, a traditionally male-dominated activity. "On foot" women shellfish collectors



Shellfish harvesting activities in Galicia underwent a much-lauded professionalization process in the last years of the 20th century, hailed as an example of good planning and governance

are the only workers in the guilds required to remove seaweed to keep healthy mollusc beds and prevent shellfish mortality. This is hard and unpaid work involving waste disposal techniques for which this category of workers does not necessarily have the proper tools and resources. If this sector was male-dominated or if women shellfish collectors were equitably present on guilds and federations management bodies and involved in social, economic and political dialogue, it is a moot question if the issue would be dealt with in the same way. In my opinion, the answer is not. Women are seen as cheap or free labour, as they have been frequently in the past.

Shellfish harvesting activities in Galicia underwent a much-lauded professionalization process in the last years of the 20th century, hailed as an example of good planning and governance. The relevance of women being finally admitted as workers in the guilds, the success of their organisational model and, above all, the significance of their inclusion in the Special Social Security System for Sea Workers, granting them social protection benefits, should not be underestimated. However, 30 years later, it may be time to objectively analyse and assess the progress made from that point to the present day. Recent massive mortality events in

the Galician shellfish beds, leading to a complete stop to harvesting in numerous areas, highlight the weaknesses of this type of fishery and the need to reorganise “on foot” activities. A new management system is necessary that can adapt to the current impact of global warming and climate change. Interruption of activity events made it clear that current social protection is not adequate and does not provide coverage to all shellfish harvesters. Furthermore, low levels of income from shellfish harvesting hinders the necessary generational renewal of a sustainable profession that helps to protect the marine environment and resources.

Equal representation of women in the guilds is a matter of social justice, but it also supports environmental protection and sustainable governance of the Galician coast. The Law 9/1993 on Fishermen’s Guilds in Galicia has become obsolete in this regard, as it favours certain economic groups and penalises women’s participation. No political party in the Galician Parliament seems willing to amend this law; even though women’s associations in the fisheries sector have long called for reform, a proposal that the Guilds and Federations are against. The transformation of shore-based shellfish harvesting and progress towards greater equity and inclusivity necessarily requires a review of

current leadership models both in fisheries and in society. As is the case of women workers in other sectors, women shellfish gatherers, are the main caregivers in the household. Many still hold the view that the professional activity of these women is a mere “supplement” to the family economy, a job that provides a little income on the side while they look after their children and other dependent adults and the house. The enormous weight of reproductive jobs drives women further away from full and equal participation in representation and leadership roles. Public policies theoretically geared towards achieving equality in the

sector are often patronising, ineffective and, in many cases, replicate and cement existing stereotypes, treating women as children, unfit for management roles. Gender equality remains a highly sensitive issue in a fishing sector that still resists even minimal changes, such as using a more inclusive name for the guilds (officially known as Fishermen’s guilds) or offering gender-equality training to members and leaders. Lack of transparency also represents a burden when trying to obtain sex-disaggregated statistics and other data elements necessary to better analyse the problems of fisheries from a gender perspective, as required by law. ❏

Net Working

Atalaia exemplifies the power of community and the enduring value of traditional craft in modern times

By **Akila Veena**
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(Courtesy: The following text is based on the article “Women repairing fish nets is an old tradition”, which appeared in Eurofish April 2024/2 and is available at <https://eurofish.dk/magazine-issues/em-2-2024/>)

In the picturesque region of Galicia in northwest Spain, the tradition of netmaking and repair is deeply intertwined with the local fishing industry. This craft, historically carried out by women, has seen a resurgence thanks to the efforts of organized associations. Among these associations is Atalaia, a key member of the Galician Federation of Artisanal Netmakers, O Peiran.

Atalaia was established in 2005 in A Guarda, a small town where fishing is a vital part of the economy. Initially, the women of Atalaia worked from their homes, crafting and repairing nets for large fishing vessels operating in the Grand Sole Bank, a region in the Celtic Sea between Ireland and Spain. These vessels target species such as hake and anglerfish, requiring durable, expertly-made nets. Additionally, the women worked on

nets for smaller coastal boats. The logistics were challenging, with nets being delivered to their homes by truck and van, but the dedication to their craft kept the tradition alive.

The early days of Atalaia were marked by significant logistical challenges. The nets, essential for fishing operations, were delivered to the town square by a large truck. From there, a van would distribute the nets to the home of each woman involved in the craft. This method, while effective, highlighted the need for a centralized workspace. The women managed to persuade the town council to provide them with a communal facility where they could work together. For over a decade, this facility became a hub of activity, with ten women working collaboratively to add the top and bottom lines to the nets and perform necessary repairs.

However, the association faced a significant challenge as the original members began to retire. The group dwindled to just three members, bringing Atalaia to the brink of dissolution. Marina Alvarez, one of the remaining members, reached out to O Peiran for support. Recognizing



Source: <https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/spain.jpg>

The netmakers of Atalaia continue to uphold a vital tradition while navigating modern challenges. The netmakers of Atalaia continue to uphold a vital tradition while navigating modern challenges

the critical situation, the federation organized net-making courses across Galicia. These courses not only preserved the skills but also attracted new members, revitalizing the association. Today, Atalaia boasts seven active members who are proficient in the craft.

Marina Alvarez expressed her delight at the progress made by the new members. “They can now do everything independently without having to ask me,” she says, highlighting the successful transfer of skills. For her, the addition of four new members not only ensured the continuity of the association but also demonstrated a renewed interest in the trade.

To supplement their income and showcase their creativity, the women of Atalaia also create various accessories from leftover materials. Brooches, bracelets, rings, and scarves are among the items they craft, blending traditional techniques with modern design. These products are displayed and sold in a store within their workspace, providing an additional revenue stream and a platform to exhibit their skills.

The association’s efforts extend beyond mere production. Atalaia actively promotes the profession through public outreach. They organize tours of their facilities and conduct

workshops to educate the public about netmaking and repair. Schoolchildren, in particular, are introduced to this ancient craft, fostering an appreciation for the profession and potentially inspiring the next generation of netmakers. These initiatives aim to raise awareness about the trade and advocate for improvements in working conditions, social security, health benefits, and environmental issues.

At a broader level, O Peiran plays a crucial role in advocating for the netmaking profession. The federation seeks to regulate the trade nationally, ensuring a sustainable future for netmakers. One of its primary goals is to secure a new generation of netmakers to take over as the older generation retires. This involves not only training new entrants but also providing alternative employment opportunities during periods of inactivity.

Improving port infrastructure is another key focus of the Federation. By enhancing the facilities where netmakers work, O Peiran aims to reduce occupational injuries and create a safer working environment. The Federation’s efforts have already yielded significant successes, including organizing training sessions that improve the skills and employability



Netmakers of the Rederas Atalaia Association in Baixo Miño, A Guarda, in Galicia, Spain. From left, Sara González Pacheco, Sonia Fernández González, Nuria González Adrover, Mila Martínez González and Marina Álvarez Rodríguez

of netmakers. These sessions culminate in professional certifications that recognize the expertise of both new and experienced netmakers. This formal accreditation is a crucial step in professionalizing the trade and ensuring its recognition at a national level.

Despite these positive developments, the netmaking industry faces significant challenges. Marina Álvarez acknowledges the ongoing challenge of undeclared work. Many individuals prefer to work from home without formalizing their activities, driven by economic pressures. This practice undermines the efforts of associations like Atalaia, making it difficult to attract new members and secure fair wages for all women in this trade. Undeclared work is also a serious threat to decent work and fair wages, as such practices tend to undercut the wages of those working legitimately and hence deters young people from joining the profession. Marina Álvarez emphasizes that the quality of their manual work surpasses that of machine-made nets, providing a competitive edge. However, the proliferation of undeclared work jeopardizes the industry's future, making it essential to address this issue.


Recycling is another area where Atalaia has made significant strides. The association has agreements with fishers to collect netting that can no longer be used. This material is then repurposed into new products or sent for commercial recycling, where it is converted into ropes and nets for mussel farming in Galicia. This practice not only supports the local economy but also contributes to environmental

sustainability by addressing the issue of abandoned, lost, and discarded fishing gear, which contributes to marine plastic.

As the focus on sustainability intensifies, Atalaia is exploring the use of biodegradable nets. While fully biodegradable nets may not yet be viable due to durability concerns, mixtures of biodegradable and conventional materials offer a promising solution. These innovative materials balance functionality with environmental friendliness, aligning with the broader goal of sustainable fishing.

Since its inception, the Rederas Atalaia association has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Through the support of the O Peiran Federation and their own innovative, the netmakers of Atalaia continue to uphold a vital tradition while navigating modern challenges. Their story is a testament to the power of community, the importance of preserving cultural heritage, and the potential for traditional craft to evolve and thrive in contemporary contexts.

By fostering a new generation of skilled netmakers, promoting sustainable practices, and advocating for fair working conditions, Atalaia and O Peiran are ensuring the future of this ancient craft. Their efforts exemplify how organized associations can make a significant impact, not only preserving a way of life but also adapting it to meet the demands of the present and future. The women of Atalaia are not just netmakers; they are custodians of a rich cultural legacy, innovators in their field, and a vital part of Galicia's fishing community. 🌊



Since she was seven, Anna Ramirez, now 63, has been fishing with her family off the coast of Belize's southernmost district—Toledo. Never has being a woman stopped her from working just as hard as the men do while at sea.

Her most challenging moments have involved braving the rough seas, even under the threat of hurricanes. "It's not easy. You have to be brave and willing to take chances—big chances too!" she says.

PROFILE

Fisher of the Year—Anna Ramirez

A role model for future generations of fishers

This is an abridged version of an article featured in the following website:
http://www.crfm.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=447:anna-ramirez-fisher-lady-of-punta-gorda-recognized-as-fisher-of-the-year&Itemid=179

As a young girl, Anna Ramirez, like her brothers, took up fishing for a living. The area where they traditionally fished was declared the Port Honduras Marine Reserve Area in 2000, and today, the introduction of a managed access programme there by the Belize Fisheries Department has helped to reduce illegal fishing in the area, thus improving their fish catch. Notably, Anna Ramirez was instrumental in the establishment of the reserve.

Anna and her husband, also a fisher, have taught their nine children to fish. In fact, she

says that her biggest reward is having been able to teach her children what she knows. Although Anna herself no longer fishes, her children do, and she markets their produce at the Punta Gorda Town market in Toledo thrice a week. Fishing, says Anna, made her an independent woman, and she never fails to urge young people to learn the trade so that they too can become independent.

Recently, Anna was chosen for special recognition as the winner of the 'Punta Fuego Outstanding Fisher of the Year' award for her commitment and dedication to hard work, and for consistently encouraging young people to take up fishing in sustainable ways. The award was presented on the occasion of the first ever Fisherman's Day festivities in Belize on Monday, 29 June 2015.

Speaking on the occasion, Marla Ramirez of the Fisheries Department, described Anna as, "not only a responsible fisher and advocate but a Belizean sustainable fisher ... She has always taught her children to take out what is necessary and put back what is small."

While Anna Ramirez is hopeful about the prospect of her grandchildren being able to earn a decent living from fishing, she feels illegal fishing is currently the greatest threat to the sector and must be decisively tackled by the government. ❏

“Through struggle we achieve our objectives!”

This article is based on an interview with Natalia Laiño Lojo, General Secretary of the Galician Association of Women and Men Shellfishers (AGAMAR) conducted by Patricio Igor Melillanca (patricio@ecoceanos.cl), Ecoceanos, Chile

Translated from Spanish by **Brian O’Riordan** (briano@scarlet.be), Secretary, ICSF Belgium Office

“Shellfish gathering in Galicia generates work for around 5,000 women and 4,000 men gatherers. What is produced must pass through the *lonja* (auction). Only the specific quantities of particular species approved through agreements established between *cofradia* (see interview) and the regional administration under the *junta* can be extracted. Through this, we avoid saturating the market and are able to conserve resources, select for quality and control prices.”

Talking about shellfish gathering in Galicia is Natalia Laiño, General Secretary of the Galician Association of Women and Men Shellfishers (AGAMAR). Shellfish gathering is a traditional activity in Galicia. Says Natalia: “What we did in recent years was to get social recognition for them as workers.”

Shellfish gathering used to be a supplementary activity involving the family unit. When women and their children had some spare time, they would go to the sea to gather small amounts of shellfish for sale in the small regular markets or to a small trader in the area at that time.

Natalia represented Galicia’s shellfish workers in the recently-concluded Global

Conference on Small-scale Fisheries in Bangkok (4SSF). According to her, there is a great deal of difference in the way that rights are dealt within Galicia and what was discussed at the Conference. “In Galicia, there is a need for basic rights including the right to livelihood, right to obtain work and health insurance and the right to information for consumers.” However, some issues, for example, the fight against pollution, are common.

Galician beaches are threatened by pollution from housing. Says Natalia: “At one time the Galician *junta* paid women workers to clean up the beaches, during which time they did not extract shellfish. But we want to eliminate pollution, because the mainstay for women shellfishers is not subsidies for cleaning up the beaches, but the produce of the sea.”

What other issues affect shellfish gatherers? Says Natalia: “We are also interested to have a debate on trade issues, about how extraction can be regulated and managed in ways that allow us to guarantee conservation of resources in the water, and also allows for the possibility of regulating the market. And we are committed to informing people that in Galicia the products extracted are artisanal and healthy. Our message is that there are different struggles, and we can say that through struggle, we achieve our objectives.”

Europe/ Spain

Shaking up traditions

A women's association from El Pamar, Valencia, Spain is challenging the age-old patrilineal system, in which only the male offspring of fishermen inherit rights to fish

By Carmen Serrano Soler, The Women's Association of Tyrius, El Palmar, Valencia, Spain

El Palmar is a small place, with 850 inhabitants, under the administration of the provincial capital, Valencia. It is located on an island in Lake Albufera of Valencia. Forty years ago, it had no overland access. Communication was by boat, and this was the only way to travel to the outside world. From the beginning, the inhabitants subsisted mainly on fishing in the lake. They belonged to the Comú of Fishermen, which has its origins in the Gremial movements at the turn of the 11th century.

For their own benefit and for geographical reasons, a "fishermen's community" was formed, charged with protecting the fishery and the interests of the fishermen members. This began to operate independently from the Comú of Fishermen. Only men could participate in the organization and share the benefits generated by it, and these rights were passed on to male children. Daughters were excluded from any inheritance rights related to the fishery. The interest of fathers was to find a fisherman to marry their daughters off to, so as to be able to continue the community custom. The marriage of a daughter to a forester, or a non-fisherman, was accepted only with reservations.

Thus functioned the organization of fishermen until 1994. That was when the only women's association in the area decided to propose to the fishermen's community the possibility of adopting changes in the constitutional rules. They were asked to consider the possibility of allowing their daughters equal rights to their sons to inherit, enjoy, and pass on fishing rights.

It is hard to understand the reasons for maintaining age-old customs that deny women's participation, especially in a place like Valencia, at such a short distance from the capital. This was what prompted our women's association to claim some of our constitutional rights that we were—and are still—entitled to.

Women had never formed part of any public entity, until the founding of the Housewives Association of

Tyrius in El Palmar. Several activities were organized through this association to improve the situation of women and to escape from the subservience to husbands or fathers. These included training courses, cultural visits, trips and conferences. Women could only operate in private and not in public. They could not even go to the city alone, or go into a bar, as this was not considered acceptable. It was only in religious *cofradiás* that women were given positions of responsibility for organizing social activities in the community. The time had come to raise the possibility of changing this situation of sexual discrimination that women had to put up with. And this was how the contest between men and women started.

We tried to change tradition, imposed by the force of custom and submission. We have been condemned as rebels by the closed society of El Palmar for daring to bring before the courts the local culture that has been passed on from generation to generation. We had shown evidence to the outside world of the local ethnocentricity, which is considered to be above justice and the Constitution.

We had tried to remedy the sexual discrimination that denies daughters the right to inherit fishing rights, either to use them or to pass them on. Above all, it is only the male children of fishermen who may become part of the fishermen's community of El Palmar. This excludes daughters and their children, if they marry outside the community. It does not matter if a fisherman's wife is a local or an outsider, because the only way that fishing rights may be inherited is through the father.

The rest of the local community has denounced the social changes proposed by us. Our women's association had taken the case to the local tribunals, and, despite having won the court case, until today, July 2003, the judgement, dating October 1998, has still not been fully complied with.

Those of us who have tried to advance the struggle for equal rights have been injured by other women, like ourselves, who have defended the male territory of the fishermen's community. Ironically, even though it is they who stand to gain from our achievements, they are preventing us from enabling them to benefit from equal rights.

We felt that we could use the women's organization, which had now been consolidated, to begin to claim our rights as human beings, as laid down in the Constitution. The restriction on inheriting fishing rights also affected the sons of women who, although they were cousins of fishermen, had no rights to fish because their fathers' were not fishers. We felt that we should act to change such discrimination. And so we did. Our first step was to seek dialogue and consensus. But that proved useless. Having a dialogue with women was not acceptable. The second step was to make an act of conciliation; this proposal was also rejected. And, finally, we instigated legal proceedings on the grounds of sexual discrimination. We won on all legal counts in our country.

Our proceedings have not been free of incidents. All kinds of restrictions were imposed on us to force our acquiescence to the fishermen's community. Demands that were impossible to fulfill, expulsion of fishermen who supported the position of the women petitioners, street demonstrations to have us thrown out of the community, graffiti, insults... we were subjected to a degree of social ostracism hard to imagine. We were being isolated from the social milieu in which we were born and raised. This also affected our closest family members, fathers and children. Even our friends suffered due to their friendship with us.

Men assert that fishing is only a man's work, and women should look after those aspects needed to carry it out. Even daughters and wives defended this male worldview.

The most unexpected response came from the very women for whom our petition was intended. In 1999, they formed a women's association parallel to our own, with the single objective of attacking us and defending the position of the fishermen. Those belonging to this collective were actually those who stood to benefit from the gains we had achieved. People who were prepared to make a written apology, atoning for defending our position, were forgiven and were allowed to become part of the fishermen community. The most grievous injuries came, and continue to come, from women defending either their husbands or the fishermen community. The most regrettable aspect is that, at the local level, the authorities were closer to the other group's position than to ours.

People were afraid to approach us, for fear of being attacked by the opposite side. They were afraid of being on the receiving end of the rejection that we were daily subjected to. Fear, repression and lack of information were ideally suited to keep the rest of us subjugated to those who shouted the loudest. Women who dared to raise their voices were silenced or castigated. Most worrying was that these reactions did not come only from the older generation. Even the younger generation, included schoolgoing boys and girls, accepted and copied the behaviour of their fathers or mothers. We were made unwelcome and prevented from entering certain public places.



We sometimes ask ourselves if it is still necessary for a group of people to go through what we have suffered to succeed in getting fair treatment. It may be incomprehensible, but the specificity of situations requires cases to be analyzed separately. And what comes out of a situation may be totally unexpected. We are women who have pushed for changes. We brought to justice a hierarchical social organization that marginalized a group of people, and we are paying a very high price for that.

Despite everything, we believe that it has been worth the trouble to shake to its foundations an institution with outdated customs, and to open its eyes so that it can look at itself in today's context. It reassures us to know that people in different places, entities and institutions recognize what we have done. We are encouraged to know that people in many diverse walks of life share our opinions. We have been awarded very important distinctions, prizes, recognition... all this for the struggle that our association took up. But our neighbours neither accept nor recognize the work that we initiated, and what we achieved through an association of women.

(This article has been summarized from the presentation made by Carmen Serrano Soler at a recent workshop organized by the European-level FEMME network in Vaasa, Finland. It has been reproduced with permission from the author.)

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European Union/ Spain

I collected oil from beaches...

An eyewitness account of the impact of the oil spill caused by the sinking of Prestige, on Galician coastal communities

Statement to the European Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture (ACFA) by Cristina López Rodríguez, ECODESARROLLO GAIA, on 16 December 2002

Good Afternoon.

I come from Galicia, where for the last month I have been travelling along the entire coast from the mouth of the river Fo to the mouth of the river Miño.

I collected oil from beaches as a volunteer. I witnessed the desperation of fishermen who were gathering the oil on the sea with their bare hands.

I saw women discovering with their rakes that under the layers of oil there was a layer of sand, and, lower still, another layer of oil.

I witnessed directly the black tide. I attended meetings, discussions, demonstrations, gatherings of silent protest, and actions to claim rights. The Galician people have not thrown in the towel, but they need help.

I met with women whose work ties them directly to the sea—the shellfish gatherers—and with women whose work is indirectly related to the sea—fishermen's wives, net makers, and women in general. I spoke with women in the ports, in their houses, on the beaches, in the street.

There is enormous gloom and mind-boggling uncertainty about the future. Disgust and fear are widespread. But it does not seem to me that this is causing people to give up. They must move on.

In areas where fishing is banned support is being provided. Where there is no ban, the situation is even more difficult because fish is difficult to sell.

It is all very well to talk about plans to rehabilitate the environment, and about regeneration to speed up biological processes (about cleaning up, plantations, seeding etc.) or about plans to promote Galician seafood or about compensation.

But there is no work for shellfish gatherers. Young people are having to look for work far from home. That the Galician fishery sector is facing a widespread crisis is not in doubt.

It is obvious that we have on our hands a major social crisis, impacting on the Galician population in general, and on women in particular. It is affecting women who are shellfish gatherers, women whose work depends on fishing, women in general from the fishing community and women who sustain the family structure in the Galician fishing communities

We must insist that the role of women in Galicia, now more than ever, is made plain to see. Now that they have to overcome a new obstacle. Now that they see the structure of their lives and the structure and cohesion that holds their families together, falling apart. We are facing a major social impact that must be dealt with.

What is needed now is an exhaustive study on the current situation in Galicia—a social report produced with a gender perspective. That makes visible the needs, proposals and opinions of women who live both directly and indirectly from the sea. That takes into account proposals to increase the measures provided to meet social needs.

Even if the environmental damage has already been done, now is the time to deal with the social problems that we are becoming aware of through the drama we are living in.

Now is the moment to recognize the role of women and to provide them with the support measures needed to mitigate these deplorable events.

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Europe/ Spain

For there to be a future...

Women shellfish gatherers in Spain are getting organized to protect their resources and to improve their livelihoods

By Cristina Lòpez Rodríguez of the Women's Committee of Ecodesarrollo Gaia, La Coruña, Spain

50-year old Eulalia is a shellfish gatherer in a Galician *ria* in north Spain, with hardly any education. Her health is in a fragile state aggravated by the problems specifically resulting from her profession as a shellfish gatherer. She was not aware of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that took place at Rio in 1992, or of the Agenda 2,1 which deals with the most pressing problems of today and attempts to prepare the world for tomorrow's challenges by advocating sustainable development and the participation of all. In her small, hard and humid world of the shore, no information arrived about such an important event.

For Eulalia's 28-year old daughter Maruxa, pursuing an education was not easy. Nevertheless, despite the family's precarious social and economic situation, at 18 she managed to complete her school certificate studies. In a labour market that provides few options for the young, she decided to follow in the footsteps of her mother and take up shellfish gathering. It was not easy for her to adapt, and for a while she resisted, rebelling and telling herself that she wanted something better and far removed from the deprivations suffered by her mother, which she had witnessed from an early age. But, finally, she accepted her fate and gradually, not only did she take it up wholeheartedly, but, for the love of her mother and for the sake of her future, she chose to involve herself in improving the conditions of her profession. She is now struggling to find solutions to the problems faced by the sector.

Maruxa is an active member of an Association that defends the social and economic interests of women shellfish gatherers. She is aware that this militancy is not easy and that it needs a lot of strength and dedication, but she is ready to follow it through. She knows all the basic laws that apply to the shellfish sector: the Galician Fisheries law, the Galician Co-operatives Law, the norm governing the establishment of Associations. She knows everything about

Fishermen's *cofradias*, about decrees that regulate the extraction of molluscs, about fishing and shellfish licenses (PERMEX), about decrees governing fishing gears and trade, about the penalty regime, etc.

Maruxa did hear about Agenda 21 and, of course, she understood the references to marine pollution, and to the need to protect the oceans, to make rational use of living resources, and to improve the dignity of the people who depend on the sea. She understood the great importance of promoting education, training, and awareness among users, officials, fishermen, women and youth in order to achieve sustainable development and to deepen the traditional understanding of the environment. She understood the importance of social and cultural values and of teaching respect for the resources. She understood very well the role of women in this world. She knows that she is not alone, that there are many Maruxas in this world who are fighting for the same dream. She knows the strength that can come from linking together women from around the world with the same problems for finding appropriate collective solutions.



In the last Assembly of the Association, Maruxa spoke. With all the participants applauding, she spoke convincingly and passionately about the need to be fearless, to participate, struggle, learn, and clearly establish the role of women.

From the back row, and although she did not understand

some of the things so enthusiastically spoken by her daughter, Eulalia felt proud of her and felt that in some way things were going to change for the better in the work from which she and her generation had reaped more suffering than benefit.

In the depths of her thoughts Eulalia heard the voice of Maruxa saying, "...it is fundamental to recognize and strengthen the role of women in fisheries and in the integrated development of the community, as well as their participation at all levels of the decision-making that affects the sector.... We will also work towards the day when women shellfish gatherers take up managerial positions in the fishery..."

Many women like her are needed to stop land-based pollution caused by dumping industrial and urban wastes, oil pollution, the destruction of beaches through the so-called 'beach regeneration' schemes, the appropriation of shellfish areas for 'beach leisure', the municipal destruction of the coast with urbanization and the degradation of coastal marshy areas. Indeed, these women are urgently needed to stop the destruction and to re-establish the balance... for there to be a future.

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In the News/ Spain

Silent Slaves

Fishermen's wives associations in Spain have initiated a campaign to improve the working and living conditions of sea-going fishermen

An article by L.C. Saavedra in *Voz de Galicia*, Spain, translated by Brian O'Riordan.

Several organizations have initiated a campaign to obtain the 500,000 signatures needed for establishing a Common Law. Several associations of seafarer's wives from all over Spain will send a proposal to the Congress of Deputies for establishing, as Common Law, a norm for regulating the activity of sea-going fishermen. They will continue to collect the half million signatures needed until 30 November 2002.

Till today, there is no legal way for fishermen to improve their on-board working and living conditions through the Constitution. An initiative such as this to establish a Common Law requires half a million signatures for it to be taken up by the Congress, and for it to be treated as a binding norm within the Spanish legal system. The authors of this proposal are several associations of fishermen's wives from the autonomous communities of Galicia, Basque country, Catalonia, Andalucia and possibly, even from the Canary Islands communities.

The main idea of such a law is that the legal system can be used to increase the rest period on shore as a function of the time worked at sea. It is proposed that, initially, for every four months worked, two months of rest be provided. The main sticking point that must be solved is who will pay for this. To start with, it is proposed that the government approaches the European Social Fund to pay for part of this rest period, and that the rest be shared by boatowners and the administration.

Josefa Soto and Cristina de Castro, respectively the President of Rosa dos Ventos and the national fisheries delegate of the Apostolate of the Sea, spoke in Vigo about the task facing working society in the 21st century to humanize. They declared that "seafaring fishermen are this century's new and silent slaves".

In the opinion of Soto and de Castro, the proposal will not only contribute to improving life of the workers but the rest periods will also, at the same time, reduce

fishing effort as the current working regime, more than 10 hours daily, is a factor that favours overfishing. Josefa Soto, and Cristina de Castro are carrying out the awareness raising campaign across the length and breadth of the country in order to obtain the half million signatures needed. All kinds of Spanish institutions will be contacted, including the official representatives in Madrid and Europe. The promoters hope that the signatures can be presented before 30 November, a date that will coincide with a Congress they are organizing in Vigo.