

# Returning to land and sea

**The harsh economic impact of the ongoing pandemic-related lockdown has spurred fisherwomen in Costa Rica to return to their traditional sources of livelihood**

By **María Suárez Toro** (escuelabuceocaribesur@gmail.com) independent journalist and social activist, Costa Rica, edited and translated from Spanish by Sol Vals



María Suárez Toro

Although there have been very few COVID-19 cases in the area, the suspension of tourism with the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the southern Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. Until recently, tourism was the mainstay of the local economy in the coastal communities of Puerto Viejo, Cahuita, Manzanillo and Cocles. However, the crisis has brought about a re-activation of traditional ancestral livelihoods where fishermen and women take to the sea in boats and kayaks bringing food to their families and communities.

Former fisherwoman, the 72-year-old elder, Cipriana Rocha, who had to stop fishing two years ago in Manzanillo, fulfilled a longtime dream to set up her own bakery. “The coconut has always been part of the fishing livelihood and now it is the basis of the food I produce in this emergency so that that my community has bread and I can make a living,” said Doña Cipriana. Her statement reflects the traditional recognition that land and sea are connected in whatever takes place in the livelihood of the coastal communities.

Tomasa Acosta, a 55-year-old indigenous Bribri fisherwoman, started fishing as a child in the rivers of Guanacaste in the Pacific until she married her Afro Costa Rican husband, and came to live in the Caribbean where they have raised their children and later grandchildren. At the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, she realised that there would be no food on her table if they did not produce it themselves. In less than a week’s time, she reorganized her life. Her retired husband and two of her three children began going out fishing in their small boat every day. Their efforts have fed her family and community during the crisis. Her message to people who do not fish but find themselves struggling in the middle of this emergency: “Grow food and we will provide the fish to compliment what you grow on the land”.

Recently, a remarkable experience occurred in Casa del Pueblo, Puerto Viejo. A diverse group of women, held together by the shared belief that food sustainability is vital during emergencies, organized a meeting so that they could support each other and tend to their family and community vegetable gardens.

“Among all the grassroots projects to reactivate the economy and culture that have

been generated during this emergency, the ones which have to do with family and community gardens are the ones that resonated the most. And so we organized this meeting”, said Gloria Gavioli, president of the Talamanca Association of Conservation and Ecology (ATEC) and spokesperson for the Mano Vuelta, a campaign organized by the Centro Comunitario de Buceo Embajadores y Embajadoras del Mar (Ambassadors of the Sea). The emergency response initiative Mano Vuelta was started in March 2020 by a group of activists to help elderly community members reactivate traditional livelihoods amid the emergency.

“The idea is to improve our food strategy. We all agree that assistance should be provided to people in need. However, we need a solution that, unlike occasional amounts of money conceded to buy groceries, lasts long-term and in an efficient and productive way. Food self-production and self-sufficiency are essential. With such capacity building, one is able to consume locally-produced and fresh organic food, just harvested or just fished, achieving what too many of us lack today – a balanced diet, rich in nutrients, that reinforces our immune system, which, given the circumstances, should be a priority”, Mariana Valls emphasises. Valls is an Argentinian environmental lawyer living in Costa Rica. She is a specialist in food waste and shared with us some alarming facts about the state of world food production: 821 million people underfed; 155 million children are malnourished; 1941 million people are overweight or obese; there has been a substantial increase in food-related diseases including diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer; 1300 million tons of food - equivalent to one third of the world’s food production – is lost or wasted every year, an amount that could feed 2000 million people, that is, more than the double the numbers currently underfed.

Valls’s motivational talk made immediately clear why the local population resonates with the idea of local food production during an emergency such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, providing humanitarian food is good, but teaching people to grow their own food is even better in the short as well as long term.

The experiences of local participants testify to experiences and benefits of community



Sargassum arrived at the Playa Negra Beach, Cahuita, in July 2020. With support of youth and children, gardener Leda Villa and Esteban Gallo, picked it up and spread in in the collective garden.

gardening and food self-sufficiency. The following examples were shared:

Indigenous activist, Bribri Layli Zarrin, who has a lot of experience with working at her family's finca (ranch), Loroco, in Talamanca, began a partnership with, Javiera Alvarenga, Chilean resident, schoolteacher, and food producer, involving the assessment of family and community gardens.

Leda Villa, member of Mano Vuelta, came to the region 45 years ago to develop a governmental programme of rural gardens throughout the Talamanca territory.

Maritza Medrano and Arlene Diez Forbes form part of an Afro-descendent women's group that was recently trained in community gardening and food security, through a project funded by the Japanese Embassy. "We must return to the land and the sea just as we were raised by our grandparents – rich and healthy. There was neither obesity nor sickness because of the way we were feeding ourselves," Medrano claims.

In a coastal community where once "everything came from the sea", community gardens are now bringing the nurturing elements from the ocean into land production.

Among the coasts of the southern Caribbean, the proliferation of the Sargassum seaweed is far from being an environmental problem like in neighbouring areas of the Caribbean. Instead, the community uses the seaweed to fertilise the crops they grow. Coral components present in the land that was once under sea level, play an important role in replenishing the soil with rich minerals.

Some unexpected outcomes have occurred as well. A traditional Afro-descendant dish re-emerged during this emergency, symbolising the indivisible gastronomical link between land and sea in the Caribbean – this is the Rondon (Rundown), a fish soup made of a diversity of tubers and spices grown in family gardens, including taro such as malanga and tiquisque, corn plantain and yucca, combined with fish cooked in coconut milk.

All in all, women play not only an active but a crucial role in every single dimension of the emergency food chain, not just providing food but also teaching and promoting efficient, smart, and practical habits such as local production in coastal livelihoods that boost health and improve the quality of life. ■

**"We must return to the land and the sea just as we were raised by our grandparents – rich and healthy. There was neither obesity nor sickness because of the way we were feeding ourselves"**

# Critical routes

## Women fishers, shrimp peelers and mollusk workers in Costa Rica identify priority areas for the recognition and formalisation of their work

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Costa Rica is a country with great marine biodiversity and has an important cultural heritage in its coastal marine areas. However, recognition and opportunities for decent work for the country's small-scale fishers and mollusk gatherers, especially for women who work mainly in pre- and post-fishing activities, are scarce.

The country does not have a fishing census; therefore, the information on the number of fisherpeople in the country's various fishing categories is not up-to-date. There is even less information that can be used to analyse and recognise the role and importance of women in the small-scale artisanal fishing sector and value chains. Women contribute not only to small-scale artisanal fishing but also to various types of pre- and post-capture activities, such as processing and marketing of fishery products – activities which are pillars of support for the sector but continue to be poorly recognised.

Given this situation, in 2019, a study was carried out to support the visibility of women in the different value chains of Costa Rica's fisheries. This was a first step towards formalising and seeking dignified and decent work opportunities and articulating cultural identities related to the sea within the framework of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). The initiative, developed by CoopeSoliDar R.L. was commissioned and financed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (National Institute of Women - INAMU).

The work was carried out with effective participation of fisherwomen, both the leaders and members of Red de Áreas Marinas de Pesca Responsable (Network of Marine Areas of Responsible Fishing and Marine Territories of Life), who formed a working group together with the technical team of CoopeSoliDar RL. The joint team developed a questionnaire containing 63 questions related to the situation of fisherwomen in the family, work, socialisation, cultural links with the sea, violence in the communities (answers being optional), institutional relationships, as well as proposals, dreams and challenges for the present and future.

The team visited 45 communities from the Pacific and Caribbean coast of Costa Rica

and met with 486 women from different value chains representing diverse marine and cultural contexts. Mollusk processors, fillet workers, shrimp peelers, clam processors, artisanal fishers, among others, were interviewed along both coasts of the country, the Pacific and the Caribbean. We discuss here some of the important study findings.

In the small-scale artisanal fishing chain, the majority of women (62 per cent) were between 31 and 60 years of age. Many of these women are therefore at a stage of life where economic autonomy and social security for retirement are important questions. However, most of the work they do is not covered by decent retirement options.

This is in stark contrast to their multiple and sustained contributions to a range of different pre-fishing and post-fishing activities. Women not only carry out the same tasks as male fishermen, but also shoulder the additional responsibility of reproductive tasks.

The study also reveals significant participation of fisherwomen in the various local organizations that revitalise productive actions in their coastal marine territories, ranging from supporting community members, including older adults and children, to engaging with community welfare organizations. There is a significant participation of women in artisanal fishing organizations; however, their participation in decision making spaces is not as frequent.

In the family sphere, half of the women interviewed revealed that they experienced family violence in the community or within their families, expressed in different ways, from physical to verbal and or emotional violence. These women attributed the violence to the use of alcohol and drugs, exposure to football games during closed fishing seasons, various forms of stress, and male chauvinism.

Since the study explored diverse value chains within small-scale artisanal fisheries (shrimp, mollusks and scale fishing), the findings reveal an enormous diversity of practices associated with several little known and studied women's productive activities in Costa Rica.

In all the communities studied, the activity of artisanal fishing is linked to aspects of identity that come from previous generations of women. This traditional knowledge is of vital importance in terms of the conservation



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and sustainability of local marine resources and therefore contribute to sustainable fisheries at the national level.

Women linked to the sea in Costa Rica are still at incipient levels of organization. They perceive that they need to strengthen their organizational processes, become more visible as a sector and gain access to opportunities for recognition, formalisation, improvement of their working conditions, infrastructure and fishing gear, as well as to have decent work in these value chains.

Earnings of women in activities linked to artisanal fishing are generally very low. In most cases, women do not perceive significant changes in their income irrespective of whether the times are bad, regular and good. Variations are few, and according to the data, incomes for the majority are well below the stipulated minimum wages in the country.

Practically all women in the study reportedly invest their earnings to fulfill the basic needs of the family and do not have money left over for leisure and recreation, personal health, education, training and other interests. On the other hand, there are very few opportunities to access institutional care, which is why women of reproductive ages choose to leave their children in the care of relatives or are forced to take them to their places of work in fishing.

Women in most value chains face high occupational health risks. They are exposed to

infections, excess sun, various insect bites in mangroves and coasts, cuts, encounters with wildlife and a variety of diseases.

In general, much of the training received is not aligned to the traditional knowledge they have. Also, not all women who fish, glean mollusks or peel shrimp have a permit or licence that supports the formalisation of their activities.

In all the value chains studied, women were found to be doing at least two or three types of work, including reproductive labour, which was found to be the primary responsibility of the majority of the interviewees. Women do the major work within the family in terms of care giving, preparing food to take to work and taking care of children and the elderly.

In general, the study found that women aspire to a fair recognition of their work in artisanal fishing. The issues of market access, price improvement, access to collection centres, land tenure and real participation in decision making by organizations are aspects requiring urgent attention.

The issue of violence against women is also a concern. While not all women felt confident to discuss the issue, they felt that it needed to be addressed comprehensively, with due attention paid to the consequences of violence and strategies to prevent violence.

With regard to the presence of women in organizations of coastal marine communities,

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the study revealed lower participation in rural areas and higher participation among populations with urban characteristics. Many women felt that there should be greater and more efficient inter-institutional coordination in response to both the demands of the sector and to the specific conditions of women in their different life cycles and aspirations.

The study made the following action recommendations to authorities and institutions in the fisheries sector with respect to the lives and livelihoods of women in fishing communities:

**Action 1:** Recognition of the contribution of women's work to small-scale fisheries.

**Action 2:** Recognition of the diversity of work in the different value chains and in the different

marine-coastal contexts in which women participate.

**Action 3:** Addressing the issue of access to land and sea.

**Action 4:** Strengthening the issues related to the organization, promotion of networks and effective public policies with respect to the interests of women fishers.

**Action 5:** Proposing strategies for changing power relations and addressing violence

**Action 6:** Advancing actions aimed at well being and integral health.

**Action 7:** Promoting linkage between gender and value chains in artisanal fishing.

**Action 8:** Building a communication and knowledge generation strategy. ❏



## PROFILE

### **Sonia Medina Matarrita: Fisherwoman from Isla Venado, Costa Rica** **Single but not alone**

By **Vivienne Solis Rivera** (vsolis@coopesolidar.org), Member ICSE, Costa Rica



Sonia Medina Matarrita

**B**orn in Venado Island, in the Nicoya gulf of Costa Rica's Puntarenas province, 44-year-old Sonia Medina Matarrita is part of the fourth generation of a small-scale artisanal fishing family. A single mother, Sonia has taken care of her family of two girls and one boy single-handedly for the past 13 years. The path has not been easy but all the years of struggle and hard work have paid off, and despite the odds, today Sonia has many achievements to her credit.

Sonia is the President of the fisher's association of Venado Island, a post she has held for three consecutive years. Under her leadership, the association, which has 64 fishers as members, has been able to coordinate with academic institutions, such as the National University of Costa Rica; with state institutions, such as INCOPECA (Instituto Costarricense de Pesca y Acuicultura or the Costa Rican Institute for Fisheries and Aquaculture), IMAS (Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social or the Mixed Institute for Social Help) and the Labour Ministry; and

also, to engage in production activities, such as the aquaculture farming of oysters and red snappers. The association is fully involved in the implementation of responsible fishing in the Marine Responsible Fishing Area of Venado Island. As president, Sonia participates with active interest in the activities of the Marine Responsible Fishing Area Network, of which she is also a coordinator, being ably assisted and supported with technical advice by CoopeSoliDar R.L. and INCOPECA. An important objective of the Network is the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines).

Not only this, Sonia was also part of the effort that made possible the meeting and networking of women from the seas, the rivers, lagoons and mangroves in Costa Rica, which led to the formulation of a common agenda that had, as its main objective, the strengthening of fisherwomen's capacities.

Today, Sonia is also a part of the Director Board of the INCOPECA. In this capacity, she will be representing Costa Rica's small-scale fishing sector for the next four years, furthering the interests of this sector and of her association, as also, strengthening the board's capacity to engage in meaningful action. 🗣️



## Milestones

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### Taking action: Costa Rica initiates steps to implement the SSF Guidelines

Costa Rica is among the first few countries to respond immediately and favourably to the question of implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines). In a move that extends overwhelming support to the small-scale fisheries, in particular to women in the sector, the Costa Rican government, in association with the country's fishers and their representatives, and civil society organisations, has introduced a bill for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. Titled 'General Law for the sustainability of small-scale, artisanal fisheries in the context of food security, poverty eradication and shared governance', this bill is presently under consideration by the representatives of the Costa Rican Legislative Assembly.

The bill acknowledges and underlines the fundamental role played by women in the value chain of small-scale fisheries, promoting

their participation in coastal development, organisation and local entrepreneurship as well as strengthening their capacities. It acknowledges that all regulation, public policy, political decisions and administrative acts, in general, must be dictated and enforced in order to guarantee gender equality and equity, in particular, the economic or material equality between genders. Recognising the crucial role played by women engaged in the small-scale, artisanal fishing activity and in all activities along the value chain, the bill mandates the state to promote equal rights and opportunities, encouraging differentiated policies in pursuit of equity. The bill recognises that measures governing the small-scale, artisanal fisheries sector must be in harmony with human rights regarding women and based on the specific women's needs of each community.

The bill is available for download at:  
<https://www.icsf.net/costaricabill>

# Gathering cooperation

**Women mollusk gatherers of rural Costa Rica are leading the way in becoming self-reliant and organized**

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Costa Rica has about 14,800 artisanal fishers who inhabit coastal areas of the country. Artisanal fisheries are among the most vulnerable sectors, with the highest levels of poverty for rural livelihood in the country.

Mollusk gathering from mangroves is an important source of livelihood for women in the country. There are over five thousand women mollusk gatherers, engaged in harvesting shellfish in mangroves in the country. Most of these women are heads of their households and the main wage earners. Chomes district is home to around a hundred mollusk gatherers.

According to the mollusk gatherers in Chomes, they earn between USD 1000 and USD 2000 as annual income. The average family income of around USD 160 per month was less than half the poverty wage of USD 355 per month for the year 2015. The poverty wage represented the average wage of the lowest 20 per cent of the Costa Rican population.

CoopeMoluscos R.L., is a community organization of women in Chomes, who harvest mangrove mollusks for their livelihood. It is located in the Central

Pacific coast of Costa Rica in the province of Puntarenas, in the Chomes district.

The organization of women in the Chomes started with the emergency caused by the red tide that lasted for eight months in 2013, resulting in loss of income for mollusk gatherers. A red tide is a natural phenomenon, the result of an increase in the amount of algae that produces a red coloration in the sea. Such algal blooms produce a lot of toxins that make shellfish and fish unfit for consumption. As one woman explained, "We had to give value to our productive activity. We had to look for work and to find new productive opportunities to survive." The organizing initiative was supported by the National Institute for Social Aid (IMAS), which coordinated training and work for the women in the community. In 2014, the National Institute for Cooperative Development (INFOCOOP) supported the women to form a cooperative organization.

Today the organization has 96 women members of different ages and from different backgrounds. They have started a mangrove recovery process with reforestation and clean-up actions. The organization has also applied for a use permit by the government so that mollusk gathering is formally recognized and protected against being termed "illegal". The women also have other entrepreneurship ideas for income generation. These include a soda counter that can sell food to fishermen to take when they go fishing and rural tourism activities such as sharing their knowledge of mollusk gathering with tourists. A storage facility for preserving the shellfish is also on the list.

The women know that the work is not easy, and are aware of the threats facing the mangrove ecosystem on which their livelihood depends. The damage to the mangroves is due to a lack of social awareness in the community as well as a lack of regulation of the activities of large private companies engaged in shrimp aquaculture in the neighborhood. In addition, the women have to worry about health problems caused by difficult working conditions, and dealing with markets that are unfair and heavily dependent on middlemen.

The mollusk gatherers work involves many risks. The risks and hazards the women most frequently encounter include cuts from branches or glass, wounds from thorns,

COOPESOLIDAR R.L.



Mollusk gathering from mangroves is an important source of livelihood for women in Costa Rica. The workday of the mollusk gathering women is long and hard



falls and broken bones, skin fungus, worms, arthritis and stroke resulting from sudden temperature changes; crocodiles in the channels; intense sun, wind, rain and storm; insect bites, snakes, jellyfish wounds, brittle nails, infections of all kinds, pain in the back, legs and feet, assaults from people outside the community, bee stings, boat accidents, mosquitoes, dehydration, exposure to toxic algae, heatstroke, and allergies from contact with mud.

While it is not easy to counter these problems, the women have devised certain creative protection strategies: they carry food and water and wear gloves and shoes while harvesting; they walk slowly and carefully, smearing mud on their arms or using repellents to prevent mosquito bites; they wear belts or use painkillers to relieve backache; and they wash up thoroughly after getting out of the mangroves, using chlorine to disinfect their hands and feet.

The mollusk gatherers of Chomes are important to the development of their community. They play a critical role in giving their families a better quality of life. Thanks to them, other women in the community are becoming more environmentally conscious. They know how to fish and support their peers in the task. They perform various tasks related to fishing in their community: marking the rope that measures the depth for fishing; helping

with sewing and repairing nets; loading nets onto the boats; and preparing food for the men going out on fishing trips. In addition, they have their own work in the mangroves, and of selling the harvest. Afterwards, they return home to continue with housework. They are the ones who provide childcare, attend to their houses and companions, and help children with schoolwork. Some have even gone back to studying once again. Furthermore, they say: “If fishing is not good, or if mollusk gathering is not good, we organize community activities to raise funds to help the organization”.

The workday of the mollusk gathering women is long and hard. They generally do not receive much help from their partners or other family members. What then is the hope for the future? Organizations such as INCOPECA, CoopeSoliDar R.L. and CoopeMoluscos R.L. have been working towards providing long-term support for this group of women. They hope to integrate the group under the framework of the Small-scale Guidelines, and gain the support of various government and civil society institutions to ensure decent working conditions for these women. They expect that the work of mollusk gathering will be formally recognized by the government of the Republic of Costa Rica within a year, thus ensuring access rights to the territory and the mangrove resources for the community. ❏

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## PROFILE

### Defending a way of life—Sara García Fisherwoman from Costa Rica

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A fisherwoman from Cabuya in Costa Rica, Sara García, is the first to admit that fishing is hard work. But she says: “I like the work. I like working with fish. I know how to prepare and sell it, and other women admire what I do.”

Sara García’s family, traditionally a small-scale fishing family, migrated to Costa Rica from their home country, Nicaragua, when she was little. She and her siblings spent their early years in Guanacaste in northern Costa Rica, but the family moved to Cabuya in search of work when Sara was about 15. The constant search for work meant that

Sara did not have formal schooling but that was hardly a handicap since Cabuya readily offered work to those who needed it. Not just work, but as it turned out, romance too!

“I met Olivier, my husband, also a fisher, in the first ten days of coming to Cabuya. He was 18 then. We married a year later and I had my first son when I was 17 years old,” Sara reminisces.

Today, a mother of three sons, who have all turned to fishing to support themselves, Sara cleans, prepares and sells the daily catch but, just as readily, she goes to the sea to fish whenever the need arises. “I pull the nets and it is a very nice experience,” she says.

Fishing has meant everything to Sara and her family. Rather than just a source of livelihood, it is a way of life. Blessed with a


knack for empathy and solving problems, being in fishing for Sara also means lending a sympathetic ear to her comrades. “I help the fishers when they are upset and they listen to me. I can really support the fishers’ organization because they listen to me. I am like a balance for them. More women need to get involved,” she adds.

Sara’s family is closely knit; her brother, also a fisherman, and her sisters, married to fishermen, live close by and are always there for each other.

The year 2015 has been a special one for Sara. She was able to make a trip to Honduras—her first trip out of her hometown. Another feather in her cap has been completing two courses with the National Women’s Institution (INAMU).

Today Sara is both pleased with and astonished at herself: “I took a trip out of the country. I developed myself as a woman. And to think that earlier I could hardly say my name out loud!”

Known for her simplicity and straightforwardness, Sara enjoys the respect and trust of her community. Truly an inspiring person, she has many plans for the future. Recently, Sara invested in a shrimp packaging machine and did a trial sales run of *mariscadas* (assorted seafood) and shrimp packages at the local market, which went off very well. Boosted by this success, Sara says with all the simplicity and determination that are the hallmark of her personality, “My goal is to have my own business and I know that I will be successful very soon!”



**M**aritza Mena is a 51-year old fisherwoman from Costa Rica. She was selected by her community to be their representative at the International Congress of Women in Artisanal Fisheries held in Chile in June this year (see page 5).

Maritza was born in La Pita de Tarcoles, Puntaarenas in Costa Rica, into a fishing family. As a young girl, she yearned to go out to sea but the family was too poor to afford a boat for her. Her fortunes changed one day when her brothers enquired if she wanted to go fishing. “But how am I going to get there?” she asked, pointing to the horizon. They told

joyful Maritza came home with money in her pockets.

Maritza has travelled a long way from those early days. Today she owns a launch with an outboard motor and is dreaming of a bigger boat for her 16-year old son, also a fisher. Fishing is more than just work for her: “When you are out fishing, all is forgotten and when you get back home you feel renewed, yearning to get back again.” Deeply committed to protecting the environment, Maritza is a strong supporter of the “closed season”. She explains that her community has succeeded in getting INCOPECA, the national fisheries authorities in Costa Rica, to recognize a zone within the eight-fathom line. This zone, which extends out to almost one nautical mile in some places, is forbidden to shrimp trawlers.

On the eve of departure, the prospect of travelling by air to Chile for the Congress kept Maritza awake all night. But she convinced herself that being a fisherwoman, if she didn’t get seasick, then she wouldn’t get airsick either! The Congress was a great learning experience for Maritza, a dream come true. Though saddened by the experiences of machismo and sexism in the artisanal fisheries that women shared, she was greatly inspired by the stories she heard of women gaining strength through organizing. Although the women fish very differently in Chile, for seaweed and shellfish, they all experience the same challenges to earn their livelihoods and manage their resources. Maritza is happy that she too was also able to share the fishing experiences from her community with women and men who had come from many countries. ❧

## PROFILE

# Maritza Mena

**Born to Fish, Selected to Travel: How dreams came true for Maritza Mena, fisherwoman from Costa Rica**

By **Vivienne Solis Rivera** (vsolis@coopesolidar.org), Member, ICSF and translated by Brian O’ Riordan (briano@scarlet.be)

her she would soon find out. Maritza still recalls with delight the skiff with oars that her brothers built, which she almost instantly launched. The boat, however, was fragile and could not stand up to the strong sea winds. Her brothers then built her a stronger boat. “Then” says Maritza, “I could really and truly start fishing!”

Catching fish proved to be easier than selling it. “There being so few people where we live, there was nobody to sell my fish to!” says Maritza. Undeterred, she made bundles of her first little catch and set off barefoot to town, spending the day going from house to house in search of buyers. That day, a tired but

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**FROM AFRICA/ Gambia****Educating Ms. Fish Cutter****An experiment in Ghanatown catches up on women's education****by Eva Munk-Madsen, a Copenhagen-based consultant on fisheries and women's issues**

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In Gambia, women of all ages come together after finishing their household chores, in the late evening. They are here to learn English. Few of them got much school education in their childhood. They work hard every day at the beach, where they cut sharks and skates, the catch of their husbands, brothers, sons or other fellow villagers. There they salt and spread the meat on drying racks for sun-drying. Some of them are wage workers, while others are able to buy the catch and export the final processed product themselves. All of them aim at keeping their children in school and most of them succeed. At the same time, they are eager to improve their own abilities and to learn English.

In Ghanatown, a Ghanaian immigrant fishing village in the Gambia, an evening school was started this year in August. It was open to women and men who had never learned to speak English. As an outsider in the village, attempting to open an export-promotion house for by-products from the traditional fishery, I soon learned that communication in English was only possible with men, as they generally have received more school education than women. This restraint on building direct business relations with the women, together with my Danish background, made me propose the organization of evening classes in Ghanatown. In Denmark, adult education through evening classes, at low cost, is very widespread and popular.

The proposal was received with enthusiasm. The idea was presented to the council of village elders, to church leaders, in churches, and to the women's leaders, and soon the community mobilized its own internal resources. Several educated villagers had earlier organized classes for women in both English and Fanti, but the migratory character of the fishing business had always put an end to these initiatives. Now a school board has been set up with members who hold important positions in the community. This includes: the headmaster of the primary school, the Imam, a church leader, a member of the elders council, a teacher with

experience in adult education, two young innovative fish traders, two women students and me. The women rarely show up at board meetings, as they are busy with household chores when it is quiet at the beach.

I had the pleasure of teaching the first two conversation classes in English for about 15 dedicated women and 14 dedicated men. Under the light of a few petrol lamps and sometimes with strong competition from the noise of the rain falling on the tin roof, the students learned to present themselves and their occupations. "I am a fish cutter", said most women, and "I am a fisherman", said most men. On my departure, several teachers were ready to take over on a voluntary basis. For the rest of the year, the evening classes will be given free of charge. The teachers work for free. The school board has applied for some financial support to get lights in the school building and wages for the teachers from next year. A school fee will also be introduced, but it is the intention to keep it low.

The success of this initiative relies upon its acceptance, not only by the women students, but also by their husbands. The male students are, whether married or not, in a different position to make decisions on their own. The support of younger and/or educated men in the community is here of utmost importance. Blessed be the school board for their dedication to the task and their visions for a better future.