

Lost leader

Chandrika Sharma, a pioneer for the rights of small-scale fishworkers, is one of the missing on Malaysia flight MH370

By Paul Molyneux

When searchers go out looking for a vessel overdue, everyone feels it in a fishing community. We feel it right down in our guts, because we all know that one of our own may be out there clinging to a life jacket.

When the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 lost contact with air traffic control as it entered Vietnamese airspace on the morning of March 8, 2014, word flashed around the global fishing community: One of our own, Chandrika Sharma, the executive secretary of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, had boarded that plane



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in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and she was missing along with 238 other passengers and crew.

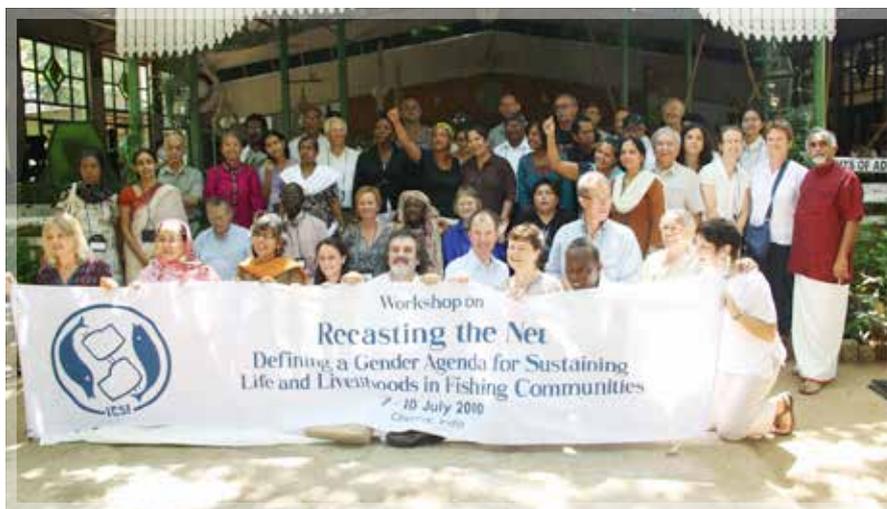
She barely got her papers in order in time to go, but Sharma is no stranger to last-minute preparations for flying

Chandrika Sharma in PRAINHA DO CANTO VERDE, BRAZIL, CELEBRATING THE 20th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FISHERMERS COLLECTIVE.

around the world. In the past 15 years, she logged thousands of miles to attend the meetings where she gives voice to the concerns of millions of small-scale and artisanal fishermen. In more recent years she has worked tirelessly on the development of international guidelines for small-scale fisheries, not just those from her home country of India, but from all over the world.

While nothing can compare to the pain and confusion felt by Sharma's daughter, husband and family, the global community of fishing people who know or even know of Sharma share the anguished wait for news. It is as if we can hardly laugh or smile until we know.

"Our silence will be great because great is the respect that we give to Chandrika," says Antonio Onorati, president of the Rome-based agrarian and fisheries advocacy group Centro Internazionale Crocevia. At press time, investigators had found no sign of the plane.



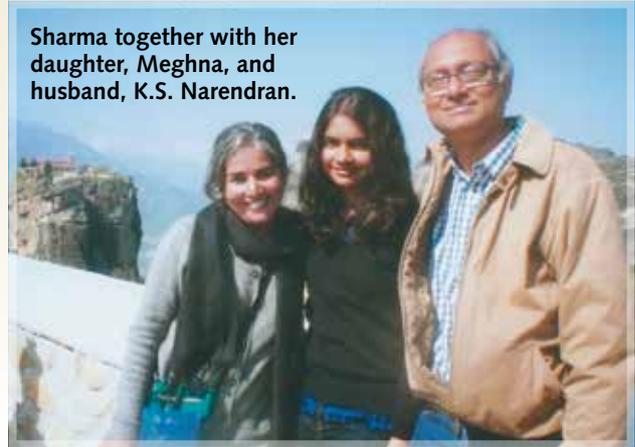
Sharma (front, third from left) with many of the leading small-scale fisheries activists. Nalini Nayak (front, second from right) once said, "As we treat women, so we treat the sea." Sharma and others carry that banner.

Reaching for the moon

The name Chandrika means *moonlight*. When 51-year-old Chandrika Sharma vanished in the moonlit hours of the early morning of March 8 on Malaysia Air flight MH370, she left two families at a loss. The first is her immediate family, including her 18-year-old daughter, Meghna, a psychology student at India's Ambedkar University in New Delhi; her husband K.S. Narendran, a consultant, and her mother, with whom she lived prior to her disappearance. The second family is a wide network of small-scale fishing people around the world.

Sharma grew up in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, not far from India's capital, New Delhi. The daughter of an Indian naval officer, she did not experience poverty directly but saw plenty and chose a career in service. She earned her masters in social work in 1989 and worked on community forestry projects before beginning the Ph.D. program at the Center for Development Studies in Trivandrum, Kerala, in 1993.

In 1995 her husband's work required a move to Chennai, where Sharma found a home with the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers and came under the influence of Nalini Nayak, a fisheries activist since 1967, and founding member of the collective. In a 1998 profile piece about her mentor, Sharma quotes Nayak: "Women are an integral part of the fishery sector. They are involved with preharvesting operations (such as net-making), as



Sharma together with her daughter, Meghna, and husband, K.S. Narendran.

well as in post-harvesting activities — the processing and sale of fish."

"It is vital to make visible the role of women," wrote Sharma, and gender issues in fisheries became a significant part of her work. Besides editing and writing for the collective's magazine, *Samudra*, in 1999 Sharma helped the organization launch *Yemaya*, a magazine specifically focused on women in fisheries.

Narendran had this to say in response to how his family is handling the strange event, and it applies to Sharma's fishing family as well, "We suffer, we agonize, we tether on the edge, but seldom allow ourselves to be overwhelmed."
— P.M.

"I don't have courage, watching interviews of relatives who talk about their dear ones on board MH370 in the present tense, to write about Chandrika in the past tense," says Sebastian Mathew, Sharma's co-worker at the collective. "If she were to vanish it would be a tremendous loss, particularly for civil society organizations. In fact," he adds, "she was on her way to attend an FAO Asia-level meeting in Mongolia to prepare the ground for [the small-scale fisheries guidelines] implementation in Asia. She saw these guidelines assisting fishing communities to protect their individual and collective space from the predatory onslaught of the market economy."

Sharma finished her graduate work at the Center for Development Studies in the early 1990s, and her former teacher John Kurien recalls recommending her to the collective in 1998.

"She had no experience with fisheries, but she was greatly advantaged because of her own earlier people and community involvements." According to Kurien, Sharma has been "a great networker and connector of persons." He credits her for never offending anyone, and expressing her differences of



Sharma (front, third from left) with colleagues, including the collective's publications editor, Ramya Rajagopalan (second from left), and Sebastian Mathew (center).

opinion in the most unobtrusive and sweet manner, and points out that her work has "always focused on local empowerment."

The collective was formed because Kurien and others saw that small-scale fisherfolk have difficulty fighting back when business and quasi-governmental institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund seek to privatize oceans through individual quo-

ta management, or industrialized fisheries, or economy-of-scale aquaculture.

New England fishermen's long battle against quota management, and ultimate acceptance of catch shares is a case in point, and it is safe to say that for the last five decades at least, many fishing communities around the world have had cultural and sometimes physical genocide practiced against them. Sharma joined their struggle to preserve resources and

access rights in 1995, when the global decline in fish stocks gave rise to the mantra “too many fishermen, too few fish.” As regulators sought to downsize fleets, the collective sought to protect the interests of the small-scale producers who harvest more than half the world’s wild catch and have few other options.

René Sherrar, who worked with Sharma in Brazil recalls her ability to move with ease and liberty wherever she goes. “When Chandrika spent some time at Prainha do Canto Verde in 2006, men and women were equal in their comments: Chandrika could just as easily be Brazilian.”

“After her first term as executive secretary [at the collective], she discussed with me the need to pass on the baton,” says Kurien. “On 4th March I wrote to her, ‘Chandrika, the problem is that you are irreplaceable.’” Sharma’s rare skill with people has earned universal respect. Civil Society Representative for Food Security Judith Pitchman calls her, “one of the most tactful negotiators, and a sincere and great activist. Always with

a smile on her face.”

Tactful yes, but Sharma has never wavered in her efforts to stop the transfer of resource wealth from small-scale fishers to large-scale entrepreneurs. Another colleague, Marta Piñeiro refers to her as “*una luchadora brillante, incansable y llena de pasión por su labor*” — a brilliant fighter, undaunted and full of passion for her work.



After another hard day fighting for fishing communities, Sharma cuts loose with friends.

Sharma also played a key role in developing the United Nations International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, deemed critical to the long-term survival of fisheries that are embedded in cultures that historically prioritized utilization over exploitation. For many fishing communities in the developing world, where Sharma has worked most diligently, local seafood is the only source of animal

protein, and proper implementation of the guidelines is a life or death struggle. As the man who wears the fishermen’s shoes, Pope Francis, put it in November 2013: “Today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.”

Sharma’s hand can be seen in the document’s guiding principles calling for respect of cultures, gender equality and equity, transparency, an eco-

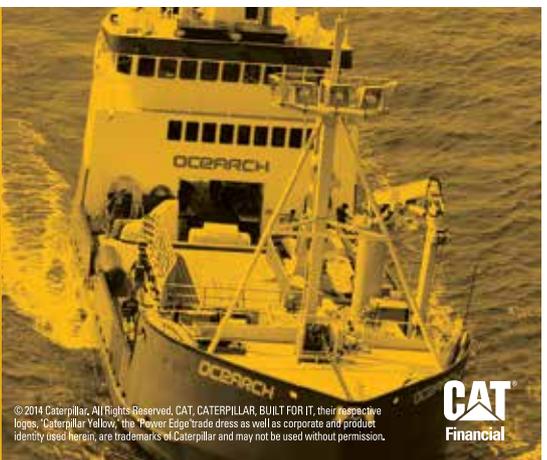


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system approach to fisheries, and social and economic viability — among others. She carries those messages to every continent, and so consistently, always with her eyes on the prize, that some become lulled into complacency simply by her presence. Maryam Rahmanian, a research associate at the Iran-based Center for Sustainable Development, refers to Sharma as “a solid wall that many lean on for support.” Perhaps we have relied on her a bit too much, and her vanishing is a reminder not to take anyone in this work for granted.

As small-scale fisherfolk need to confront the predatory onslaught Sebastian Mathew refers to, they have to find spokespersons with unique skills and passion, like Sharma. In the long, drawn-out battle for fishing culture and fishing rights, the big institutions can field a host of clones, but the small-scale fishers have only heroes. And when they lose one, they lose more than they can afford to.

While Sharma may be irreplaceable, her work is part of a larger endeavor that

Sharma and the author at the 2009 European Commission on Fisheries Meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark.

began before she arrived at the offices of the collective, and the work does not stop in her absence.

“Chandrika Sharma’s emphasis on human rights, community access to fisheries resources, and the rights of women fishers inspires us here at NAMA to continue with our own version of the Revol-ocean,” says Shannon Eldridge of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance. Thousands of activists around the world echo Eldridge’s sentiments.

On a personal note, I met Sharma at fisheries conferences around the world. The last time I saw her was at an EU fisheries meeting in Copenhagen in 2009, where she made a case for protecting Africa’s marine resources from the distant water fleets of Europe.

“Where were you last night?” she asked at breakfast on the last day. “I was looking for people to go out on the town with.”



“Damn,” I said. “We’ll have to do it next time.”

While it’s unlikely there will ever be a next time, like her family and Mathew, I do not have the courage to speak of Chandrika Sharma in the past tense. Wherever she is, she is, and her work goes on.

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Paul Molyneaux is author of “The Doryman’s Reflection” and “Swimming in Circles.”

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