

Women – Fishing and Struggling

As women fishworkers in Ceará come together for the first time, they highlight the need to forge a political identity and strengthen their collective organization

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From 26 to 29 November 2008, in Caucaia, a beach suburb in northeastern Brazil, fisherwomen from the State of Ceará took the lead in organizing their first meeting near the capital city of Fortaleza. The meeting, titled “Women: Fishing and Struggling”, brought together about 50 women from coastal villages and small cities, including two women from an indigenous community.

The meeting was organized by Instituto Terramar. Terramar is a non-profit organization that works for the social and environmental sustainability of the coastal zone through the empowerment of coastal communities. In the past years, Terramar has been seriously

speakers were fisherwomen and community activists.

The various sessions focused on women’s multiple responsibilities in the household and community. Women work both in fishery-related activities and in areas like handicraft, small commerce and services. Their economic pluralism often depends on networks of mutual aid. The discussions showed how this mix of tasks often hinders the recognition of women as workers and underlined how women’s everyday jobs are both time-consuming and not easily identified as ‘work’.

The women recounted the range of activities they carry out. Some activities, like salting fish and making gear, have declined while new activities have emerged. A fisherwoman, Luzanete, explained: “Earlier many women would weave nets. But today, with machine-made nets available, you will hardly find a woman weaving nets. My husband and I used to even pay women to help us with weaving because it’s a hard job. But now the nets come readymade and we just buy them. Women have lost this source of income. With tourism coming in, the women got into that sector, to work for the tourists.”

Marizelha Lopes (Nega) from Bahia State, a member of the co-ordination of National Fishermen’s Movement (MONAPE) and also a leader of the National Fisherwomen’s Organization (ANP), spoke of health issues of fisherwomen. Nega posed some basic questions: “How can we enjoy good health when there is no basic sanitation, hospitals, energy or education? If we are to be recognized as traditional communities, we need this recognition as a whole. If the State doesn’t recognize our communities, how can occupational conditions like injuries, vision problems due to the sun, skin cancer, back ailments, fungi infections due to humidity and so on, be prevented?”

Nega then talked about an initiative that some communities, in collaboration with a state university and government agencies, implemented in 2007. A medical researcher was invited to study the health conditions of shellfish collectors. Once the results of the study were available, a meeting, inviting selected state officers and collectors, was organized.

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Fisherwomen from different localities present results from group work about the reality of the fishing communities

concerned about the spread of large shrimp farms and has also helped put in place participatory committees for managing the fisheries and the littoral areas.

As a researcher, I was invited to make a presentation on the topic “Women in fishing: Experiences from different places” as part of a round table titled “Fishing and women days”. The topics of the other two round tables were: “Fisherwomen: Challenges for building political participation” and “Organization and political participation of women in Brazil.” Most of the

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Later that year, a seminar was held that led to an agreement with a city hospital for health checkups for shellfish collectors. “They originally agreed to see four women every week. But our strategy was to press for more consultations. Then, we began taking 10 or 12 women per week. We are now discussing how to increase this support,” said Nega.

Apart from highlighting problems, the meeting also provided space for women to articulate their identity as fishworkers. One woman said: “During the high tide, I look for shellfish in the mangrove with my husband. I have the courage because I have three little children. If one day I separate from my husband, I can still earn a living from the mangrove. That’s all we have—the mangrove.”

An indigenous woman, Navegante, from Tremembé saw fishing as an addiction, a mix of suffering and joy. “I fish in the river, the sea and the lake”, she said. “I use hook and line. No nets. I fish ‘siri’ and ‘maria farinha’ (crustaceans). We take a can to trap these. Then we prepare *farofa* (a manioc flour preparation) and we eat very well. When we go fishing, I prefer to take our food from nature. I feel like a warrior, like an Indian. Today we have been invited here because we have knowledge. And I tell you, fishing is addictive! Like cigarettes! Even if the lake is bad for health, at six in the morning I enter the cold water, up to the waist...When my sister calls me to go fishing, I can hardly sleep during the night thinking of the fishing. And today I am 60. I have eleven children. I am still addicted to fishing but not the way I used to be!”

In most of the northeastern states, shellfish are important resources and traditionally it is the women who gather them. The women are called *marisqueiras*, from the word *marisco* (shellfish), a term that conveys their separate status within the sector. Although it is not common for women to enroll in fishermen’s *colônias*, when they do so, they enroll as *marisqueiras*, not as fisherwomen. This traditional division still influences the representation of women’s roles in the fisheries and often hinders identification—even self-identification—as fisherwomen. As Graça, from Morro Branco, pointed out: “Some women have their professional card as *marisqueiras*, whereas those who fish aren’t even aware that there is that kind of card. Communication is lacking. Often women aren’t aware that they are fisherwomen and that they earn a living from fishing.”

It is worth noting that even in regions where shellfish is frequently found, for example, in the Amazonian region, the term *marisqueiras* is often used by *colônia* directors to refer to fisherwomen.

As long as this perception continues to conceal commonality with men fishworkers, hampering collective organization, this should be a matter of concern for the national organization of women.

The identity question came up again in the final session. This session was facilitated by Sílvia Camurça, from the Brazilian feminist movement, SOS Corpo (Body), who drew attention to two interesting proposals that had come from the participants: first, that the names of the fishermen *colônias* should be changed to reflect both fisherwomen and fishermen, and second, that identities based on local occupations like *marisqueiras* and *algueiras* (algae collectors) should be abandoned in favor of the more general political identity ‘fisherwoman’.

Sílvia Camurça, while acknowledging the relevance of the second proposal in securing professional rights, pointed to the dangers of losing sight of the diverse activities women assume in the fisheries. She agreed with the suggestion that the movement should consider both identities: one that affirms diverse local experiences as well as the other that affirms political selfhood. As Nega put it: “I consider myself a fisherwoman, but I don’t intend to stop being a *marisqueira*.”

The necessity to examine membership statutes came up for discussion. An approved guideline for the fisherwomen’s organization, for example, is “to study shellfish breeding cycles”. This, it was felt, is indeed necessary to protect natural resources in the current context of shrimp-farm expansion near mangroves, mounting fishing pressure, and tourism and population growth in the coastal zones. Sound ecological data too is necessary to negotiate allowances for fishers during the closed fishing season. Clearly, what is required is powerful organization in order to influence agents, researchers, unions and decision makers. In the words of Liduína, from Icapuí: “We fisherwomen know a lot, but if we don’t exchange this information and don’t come together, we’ll get nowhere.”

This meeting might have been the first of its kind in Ceará State but its origins date back to another meeting held four years ago. In 2004, soon after the new government had instituted the National Fisheries Office, a National Meeting of Women Fishworkers was held in Brasília, the national capital. Several delegates from coastal communities, including those from Ceará, were present. The following year, two regional meetings were organized in the east and west coast respectively. A team of women from the

meeting in Brasília co-ordinated these efforts. Six capacity-building workshops were held in 2006, supported by a grant from the Carlos Chagas Foundation, a Brazilian funding organization.

An outcome of the Brasília meeting was the founding of the National Fisherwomen's Organization in 2006. Around the same time, the Coastal Zone Project brought together various social movements working at the state level, which gave rise to the Forum of Fishermen and Fisherwoman from Ceará Littoral (FPPLC), a unique phenomenon in the Brazilian context. Protest marches against predatory fishing and aquaculture were organized, and conferences, well-attended by women, were held on environmental issues. On International Women's Day, 8 March 2007, a preliminary co-ordination committee was established in Ceará with the purpose of organizing the State Fisherwomen's Organization, a branch of the National Organization. With a grant from the Ecumenical Service Co-ordination (CESE), a series of local workshops were held, leading finally to the present meeting: the first meeting of fisherwomen from Ceará.

Looking back, one of the co-ordinators, Mentinha, recalled: "In these four years, we learned a lot. We discussed fishing, health, inequalities, racism, environmental management... everything! We discussed many topics that other movements never discuss."

Despite an acknowledgement of overall achievement, there was concern about the obstacles on the way. The identity issue was a dominant concern: Who is a fisherwoman? Can women who perform other parallel or temporary activities outside the fisheries, be called fisherwomen? What about those who perform pre- and post-harvest tasks? It was also pointed out that the meeting had managed to mobilize the *marisqueiras* but not the *algieiras* or the octopus collectors, who were fewer in number. It was the same case with the fisherwomen from coastal *quilombolas* communities, legally recognized as descendants of ancient slaves. Such groups were yet to be organized.

In every session women talked about the tensions they experienced within the family and even within professional organizations whenever they began to take up active roles. Women also complained about the problems they face in accessing entitlements, such as retirement benefits, maternity leave and adequate health assistance.



Bina, an algae collector and Lourdinha, a fish seller, from Batoque (east littoral) during the net weaving workshop

A major difficulty is that the organization of women still lacks legitimacy within the fishermen's organizations. It was noted that many *colônias* did not accept women at all or accepted them only to 'increase the number of voters', not because they were committed towards women's interests. However, it was felt that the National Fishermen's Movement (MONAPE), which had women in several leading positions, had promoted the fisherwomen's cause much more than the traditional state federations had.

Nevertheless, there was consensus that gender relations in the fisheries were far from balanced, and that conventional attitudes remained. The relationship of fisherwomen's organizations with other social movements or NGOs was reported to be often far smoother than with fishermen's organizations. A woman leader of a fishermen's organization describes the problem vividly: "When we came into the fishermen's organization, we thought our companions would surely have a better understanding. Not true. They assigned women to secretary roles, to serve coffee. So, we started to complain about that. We discussed methodologies, priorities for speeches and the division of tasks. It's not easy at all because when we want to discuss women's health issues, they start scratching themselves; they leave the room; they go out for a smoke. Even the assistants have trouble dealing with the presence of women."

Regarding the structure of the Fisherwomen's Organization, the members of the co-ordination team in Ceará stated that although they had seats in different councils, they had not been very effective in influencing the agenda. Manuela

was candid about the limitations: “Me and my companions were not successful in including our issues in the agenda list. For example, in the FPPLC, we debated closed seasons for fishing and boat licensing but not lake fishing and shellfish collection.”

Communication gaps were a critical problem; gaps in information and input between the state, the regional and the local levels. It was not only about distances or the shortage of transport and funds. The key issue was how to organize effectively and in greater numbers.

Similar concerns were reported at the national level. According to the representative of the National Fisherwomen’s Organization, distances between states weakened national-level organization. To proactively address this concern it was decided that for the next national meeting, scheduled to take place in June 2009 in Bahia State, groups of two members from the co-ordination team will visit as many states as possible from the North to the South to mobilize groups and partners.

Not just problems, there were positive stories as well—the case of Fortim *colônia*, for example, that had implemented different fees for women and men affiliates, proportional to their earnings from fishing.

Numerous proposals emerged from the three days of discussion, touching upon a broad range of issues: basic services, energy and water management as well as problems of violence. There were specific proposals aimed at strengthening the fisherwomen’s movement through documentation of the history of the movement; studies on shellfish breeding cycles; initiatives to control tourism expansion in the coastal zone; and efforts to include the term ‘fisherwomen’ in *colônia* names.

The co-ordination team was expanded from four to six women and a schedule drawn up for visits to coastal communities. To strengthen this initiative, Terramar agreed to prepare two documents with support from ICSF: a brief booklet on the history of organizing fisherwomen in Ceará with an account of the present meeting, as well as a handbook on women’s labour and welfare rights in the fisheries. The working group includes members from Terramar and Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP) as well as two representatives of the State Fisherwomen’s Organization.

To conclude, Ceará’s fisherwomen, who have always engaged in promoting the wellbeing of their community, today know that in order to gain social and occupational status, they need to organize collectively. They realize that this involves self-organization rather than joining existing fishermen’s *colônias* and associations. They are also aware of the obstacles they face: conventional prejudices, institutional barriers or even complexities inherent in the process of self-organization—forging a political identity, for example, that does not obscure real social differences. These hurdles are not, however, a dampener. An indomitable spirit prevailed during the three days of the meeting as fisherwomen shared their skills and traditional knowledge through narratives, writings, poetry, photographs, dancing and chanting. It was remarkable to witness the beginnings of a movement that will eventually no doubt transform fisherwomen into political actors, recognized and respected for who they are and what they do.

Note: This article is based on a report by Cristiane Faustino, Co-ordinator of Planning and Evaluation, Instituto Terramar, Brazil. ❏

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