

Q & A

Interview with Maria Odette Carvalho Martins (51), fisherwoman, leader of the community of Batoque in Ceará, Brazil and of the National Articulation of Fisherwomen of Brazil (ANP)

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Where are you from and when did you start on fishing?

I am from Balbino in Cascavel, Ceará. I was eight when I started fishing with my father. I came to Batoque at 21, when I got married. Now I am 51 years old and I continue to fish. My husband is a farmer and he also fishes, just like my father. We have five sons and seven grandchildren. On the week-ends, we sell food to tourists.

When and why did you start to fight for your community?

Batoque has a beautiful beach and it is near Fortaleza city. Since the 1980s, many different powerful persons tried to evict us and seize our land for tourism development and real estate speculation. Armed personnel burned our houses; they threatened us; they even murdered some fishers. I started fighting when I was 25, with the support of a catholic priest. Then one of the speculators forbade fishers from selling their products and from using the land for agriculture and making new houses. In 1989, we created an association of which I became President in 1993.

Did you face difficulties at home when you first became an activist?

In the beginning I had to ask my husband for permission to participate in such activities but after a compromise was struck in the presence of the priest, he became more accepting. After that, if he ever tried to deny me permission, I would remind him about the compromise! And as far as my sons are concerned, I had the support of other women of the community who would take care of them when I was out.

Please tell us about the conflict that took place over land rights.

In 2003, after many violent incidents and judicial processes, we won the struggle for the conversion of Batoque into an Extractive Reserve, that is, a conserved area where local users have exclusive rights over the use of the land and resources. The external pressures and the violence are over now but we have to continue to defend our land because today we face the new problem of one section of the community illegally selling their houses for the purpose of tourism.

What are your experiences like now?

During the period of intensive mobilization, though I suffered threats as well as two murder attempts, I was not afraid. After the declaration of the Reserve, I had health problems, and, for some time, I couldn't participate actively in our struggles. I'm better now; more active again and I feel happy about this, but my main satisfaction comes from seeing young women take up the leadership of the struggles of fishing communities, as has happened in the case of the National Articulation. **✎**