

Fighting invisibility

Fisherwomen in Brazil demand to be heard on their right to social security and decent work

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This article about fisherwomen in Brazil, when submitted to another publication, came back with the word ‘fisherwomen’ underlined in red. ‘Fishermen?’ asked a comment in the margin. While the comment might have reflected the ingrained patriarchy and invisibilization of women prevalent in parts of Brazilian society, unfortunately, women at work seem to be invisible to the Brazilian government as well.

In Brazil, two federal decrees, 8424 and 8425, published in March 2015, defined the artisanal fisherman exclusively as the professional who pulled fish out of the water. All other professionals involved with support activities—mainly women responsible for secondary activities, such as manufacturing and repairing nets, cleaning the fish or fixing the boats—were registered not as ‘fishers’ but as ‘support workers’. Support workers, according to the decrees, were “similar to fishermen”.

The impact of the federal decrees is not only symbolic, but also practical. As the women are no longer considered official fishers, they are not entitled to pension granted by the government, called *defeso*, during periods when fishing is prohibited for environmental reasons.

“Sexism in fishing is beyond women’s relationship with men. We are seen as incapable by the government,” said Josana

Serrao Pinto, the national coordinator of the Movement of Fishermen and Fisherwomen (MPP). “The decree makes it clear that the government only considers men when it comes to fishing. It is a way of taking away our identity.” The sexist view of the government would impact the sizeable number of women engaged in various activities related to artisanal fishing. There are approximately one million artisanal fishermen in Brazil, according to the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture and Supply (MAPA) statistics published in 2011. MPP estimates that approximately 45 per cent of the artisanal fishers are women.

In enacting the decrees, the government overlooks the fact that when men are prohibited from fishing, women dependent on fishing for work are also affected, and hence, should be covered by the same pension. Martilene Lima, fisherwoman and also a coordinator at the MPP, explained, “Sometimes our own husbands forbid us to go to the open sea. In my case, I have always sewn the nets, taken care of the boat and cleaned the fish that my husband brought home from fishing. During periods of closure, I too can’t work. Fishing begins on the ground. It doesn’t take place only in the water.”

“The decrees affect all women who requested to register from March 2015 onwards. It is a loss of identity and autonomy, especially economic. But it’s not clear yet how many are affected,” said Erina Gomes, juridical advisor of the Pastoral Council of Fishermen. According to the Ministry of Labour, 48,000 women registered as workers involved with fishing from January 2015 to May 2016. These women would not be eligible for pension for the no-fish period.

In June, representatives of women small-scale fishers gathered in Brazil’s capital Brasilia, at a seminar on the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), to discuss, among other things, how to make the government recognize the rights of fisherwomen. One way forward suggested was a report to define women’s activity within fishing. This could be a step towards demanding recognition of work performed by women in the sector as part of fishing,

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Fisherwoman in Rio Grande do Norte state. In enacting the decrees, the government overlooks the fact that when men are prohibited from fishing, women dependent on fishing for work are also affected

and hence, a way to assert their citizenship and political and economic rights.

Another problem with the decrees was access to social security, in particular, post-retirement pension. After much lobbying and campaigning with the federal government, another decree, 8499, was published in June 2015. This decree included support workers in the artisanal fisheries access to pension.

However, fisherwomen still have difficulty accessing the National Social Security System (INSS) in case of occupational diseases related to fishing activities, as these diseases are not recognized by the INSS. "I've been asked if my stress injury was because I typed a lot. The government officials did not believe I was a fisherwoman because there were no calluses on my hands," complained Martilene at the MPP. "If we show up all beautiful and fancy in the INSS, no one believes that we are fisherwomen. For the government, fisherwoman can't use nail polish or lipstick. We have to be ugly."

Before claiming their rights from the government, fisherwomen have to face sexism within the profession. "Our space as fisherwomen started to be recognized only since 2009. Men still try to intimidate us, to not lose their space. We've even had cases of sexual violence," said Josana of the MPP.

In a national meeting of the Articulation of Fisherwomen in 2013, the Ministry of Fisheries sent a male official to represent the ministry. Apart from not understanding the demands of women, the representative brought aprons and Bibles to distribute as gifts. "We felt very neglected and disrespected. We decided not to distribute these gifts," said the fisherwoman Cleonice Silva, who was also coordinator of the Articulation of Fisherwomen of Paraná state.

Fisherwomen are collectively managing to gradually overcome the obstacles of patriarchy within the fishing community and in the government. The awareness of the state and the professionals regarding fisheries' work-related diseases is one of them. Throughout 2016, fisherwomen from 16 states planned to gather in workshops organized by a partnership between the National Articulation of Fisherwomen (ANP), Ministry of Health, Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and the Pastoral Council of Fishermen (CPP) to disseminate information on working conditions and health of women within the artisanal fisheries sector. "These meetings will be important to gather knowledge about our health and the Public Health System," pointed out Gicleia Maria Santos, fisherwoman of Cabo de Santo Agostinho (PE) and an ANP member. ❏

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