



PROFILE

Gilda Olivia Rojas Bermudez: In defence of rights and culture Garifuna women are quick to defend their rights and their value as women...

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One of the participants in the 13th Conference of the Parties (COP 13) to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Mexico in December 2016 was Gilda Olivia Rojas Bermudez. Although participating in a conference of this sort was a first-time experience for her, the idea of biodiversity was not. In fact, you could say that respecting biodiversity is second nature to Gilda.

Born in Livingstone, Guatemala, Gilda was orphaned as a child and brought up by her grandmother. Her grandfather, a fisherman

who was part of a group of fishers belonging to the Garifuna community, worked on a big canoe owned by Gilda's maternal grandfather. In those days, a *cayuco* or traditional fishing boat used to be made out of wood and not fibre like today's boats are.

Gilda recalls that her granduncle, who owned the boat, would bring bread and coffee for the fishermen who worked for him. Every morning at four, a group of eight to ten fishermen would set out to fish after a cup of coffee, carrying food and gear for the trip in their backpacks. They would return in the afternoon, around 2 pm, with the morning's catch. Says Gilda, "Garifuna fishermen fish only as much as they need, and only during

the morning hours, never after that. They respect the sea and know that, just like they do, the sea also needs to rest and replenish itself."

The Garifuna fishermen know their reefs. They do not need GPS systems. Instead, they do what they have been doing for generations—using various points on the coast as markers to find the locations they need. "The Garifuna fisherman is a responsible fisherman. If his net traps a small fish, he will release it so that it can continue to grow", says Gilda, adding however that things are beginning to change. Trawling boats have arrived and their dragnets trap everything, even the smallest fish.

Gilda continues to describe the daily life of her people. "When the men return with the morning's catch," she says, "the women are waiting to take the fish and sell it from door to door, or to restaurants, or in the streets."

Women in Garifuna culture play an important role. Earlier, says Gilda, they used to be dominated by their husbands. Not any more. Today, Garifuna women are quick to defend their rights and their value as women.

Only one of Gilda's grandmothers learned to read. During her time, this was a rare privilege. Today things have changed. Garifuna women are getting educated, and some even work as lawyers, teachers and doctors.

For Gilda, the Convention on Biological Diversity was an opportunity to meet women from different parts of the world. She believes that more fishers from the Garifuna community should attend such conferences. They have been taking care of the sea for a long time and would be able to contribute richly to such gatherings. **M**