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**FROM LATIN AMERICA/ Brazil**
**Proud to be a fishworker**

*Women should keep their heads high and not let go of their struggle*

**Excerpts from an interview with Joana Rodrigues Mousinho, President of the fishermen's *colonia* of Itapissuma in Pernambuco, Brazil, by M. G. Indu of ICSF's Documentation Centre at Chennai**

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I was born in the city of Itapissuma. I belong to a family of fishermen and I started fishing at the age of eight. The women's group I work with began in 1975 with the help of the church. This group started very small, but we all realized we had to defend our rights as fishworkers.

We did not have licenses to fish like the men and that was basically our main issue. Today we women fishworkers have licenses. This was the first place in the whole of Brazil where women were given fishing licenses and recognized as fishworkers, just like the men.

I was elected as President of the *colonia*. In the beginning it was very difficult because most of the men believed that the position of a woman was behind the stove or behind the sink washing clothes. Now I am very happy with my work in the *colonia* of fishermen, I am well accepted and many people support me. I fish shrimps, oysters, different types of shellfish and I am very proud to be a fishworker.

I do what I can to defend the rights of the fishworkers and the shellfish gatherers. The *colonia* now has about 2,225 members—1000 men and 1225 women. They are registered in the national welfare system. Today we have 810 women fishworkers who have retired and receive retirement benefits. Women fishworkers also get maternity allowance and an unemployment allowance during the off-season for shrimp. We also have social security in case of accident or death and I believe that us women have great advantages in the fisheries sector.

And it is mostly the women who pay the *colonia* dues for themselves and also for their husbands who often do not give their payments on time.

It is not easy to administrate this *colonia* with more than 2000 registered fishworkers, and also other fishermen who are not registered but still have the same problems. It has not been easy administering this group, and to also be a fishworker, a mother and grandmother.

I was earlier the President of the Federation of Fishermen of the state of Pernambuco. I was elected but I did not like it. I was the first woman to be elected to this position. It was very complicated. All the presidents of *colonias* were only men. They were even upset with me when I went to a meeting in Brasilia with the Ministry of Environment. They thought that I was not supposed to go and that I wouldn't be capable of doing the job.

At the present there are at least three women Presidents of *colonias* in Pernambuco. There are also women who hold positions such as Secretary and Treasurer so that is an advancement for women. So in this sense women have taken a very big step towards improving their rights and that of fishermen in general in the movement.

Women fishworkers collect crabs, mussels and other shellfish and take these to the beach to sell. They also make and repair fishing nets, and sometimes help to repair boats. They participate in the meetings of the community, besides the ones of the *colonia*, and they also take care of the house, the children and the fishermen, besides doing the other chores of the house like cooking, cleaning, gathering firewood and washing the clothes. They may also wash the clothes for other people to get extra income.

Sometimes women bring in more income than their fishermen husbands. The women actually go out and capture the fish and they themselves are the ones who go and sell it. On the contrary the men go to fish on boats which are not theirs using tools which are not theirs and they have to then share with the owner of the boat and the net. They then take very little home. This is not in all the cases, just in some. But in theory, if every fisherman had his own boat and his own net, he will bring in more income.

Women do not do any fishing in the open sea. Our area is the estuarine mangrove area. We mostly work inside the estuary and the problem we have is the

destruction of the mangrove habitat, as a result of shrimp aquaculture projects.

Since most of the women are single mothers and get their daily meals from the mangroves, this destruction is affecting directly the women. So the women know that they have to struggle and go after these issues because that is what their livelihood depends on.

Another big problem that we have is the use of explosives for fishing where all the fish are blown up inside the water, eliminating every single species in our area. Today we do not have as many fish as we used to probably due to this pollution and the use of explosives.

Another threat that we are confronting is that our small community of about 20,000 inhabitants has been trampled by tourism. We have the Santa Monica channel which is so beautiful and there are many mangroves. This attracts many tourists who come in jetskis and high speed boats. These often get entangled in our nets and destroy them. We had an accident where one of these high speed boats hit a fisherman and killed both him and his 14-year old son, except that the owner of this boat was not prosecuted because he is a very rich and powerful man. So the case has been unresolved.

However, because of this we do not hang our heads low and not fight for our rights. On the contrary now we have the help of other persons who enforce our struggle for fishermen's rights in this area.

I have a grand child who is five years old. Before coming here the TV network "Rela Global" interviewed me about the mangroves and my grandchild told me that he had seen me on TV. He was very excited. I told him he should not be excited about being on a TV because this is a struggle and you only achieve things when you struggle for them and you have to start when you are little to fight for things that you will achieve later.

What I would like to tell the other women is that they should keep their heads high, they should not let go of their struggle and should be strong and fight for their rights that they have as fishworkers, just like any fisherman!