

FROM LATIN AMERICA/ Brazil

Count us in too

Lourdinha Rodrigues has worked to give fishworker women a new self-identity

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In January this year, Cristina Maneschy, the coordinator of the ICSEF- Women in Fisheries project in Brazil, and I, had the opportunity to meet with different groups working with artisanal and small-scale fishworkers in Brazil. In Recife, in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco, Nathanael Maranhao of the Centro Josue de Castro, took us to meet with Lourdinha Rodrigues, the secretary of the *colônia* of Ponte de Pedras Goiana for the past two years. It was a rich experience for us.

Lourdinha told us that she started her work in the *colônia* on a voluntary basis. Her earlier workplace was close to the *colônia* office and she had observed that there were no women who were part of it. Concerned about this, she had spoken to the president. She had convinced him that it was in the long-term interest of the *colônia* to have women members, and he gave her the freedom to work on this issue.

In 1995 she called a meeting, and 75 women from the community came for it. She discussed the importance of women's participation in the *colônia*, of having proper documents, of making regular contributions to the INSS (the social security agency in Brazil) and to the *colônia*. Women responded well to her initiative.

During her work, she observed that women lacked self-esteem and did not see themselves as individuals or as fishworkers. They saw the *colônia* as a male space. They came to the *colônia* only to make the payments and not for the meetings. She decided to call another meeting to discuss these issues, though she was still not paid a salary for her work. She also organized meetings to discuss other important issues, such as women's health.

Many more women began to participate in meetings of the *colônia*. This was quite an achievement, since women had to overcome the resistance from their husbands or fathers, and even the resistance from other women. Their level of confidence increased. Women

who went fishing, mended nets, or processed fish (salted and dried) subsequently asked to become members of the *colônia*. At present, of the 649 members in this *colônia*, 200 are women. About 100 women make payments to the INSS. Earlier, the officials at the INSS were not even aware that a woman could be considered a fishworker. Today women feel that the *colônia* is their space too. They participate in weekly meetings, formulate their own agenda, and take notes.

The process has, however, been long. The women were mostly illiterate and Lourdinha worked to teach them how to write their names, keep accounts, etc. They were supported in this work by the Centro Josue de Castro, an institution based in Recife.

Earlier, even the women did not consider themselves as fishworkers. Lourdinha worked on their own reality, and women began to become aware of the role they play in the fishery and in the family and community. They realized that though they work, they are not recognized as workers. Lourdinha worked with images to help them discover their identity. This helped women move from domestic to public spaces. Issues of citizenship, sexual relations and familial problems were also discussed. It became clear that being active in the public domain does not mean that the other roles women play within the family and community are compromised.

Also, as a result of these efforts, payments to the *colônia*, especially from the women, have become more regular, and its income has gone up. The number of *colônia* members receiving unemployment insurance and other forms of social security from the INSS has also increased. Lourdinha's own work has become better recognized. While her earlier efforts were voluntary, she later began to be paid a salary of R60 (about US\$35) per month, which has subsequently been increased to R130.

Meanwhile, the women in the *colônia* have begun to work together to increase their income and employment opportunities. In 1997, 20 women formed a group for fish processing, and undertook a two-week course on this. This has helped improve the utilisation of fish and reduce wastage. Women make small burgers of fish, sausages, etc., and supply to snack bars in Recife. They are being supported by the *colônia* in this work, even though at every stage this has been so only after a struggle.