

## FROM LATIN AMERICA/ Brazil

### Growing recognition

**Women fishworkers emerge as subjects in their own right in the province of Para**

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Fishermen and fisherwomen from six coastal municipalities in the province of Pará, Brazil, as well as members of unions and community-based associations, took part in a meeting organized by the Comissão Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP), from 24 to 26 September this year. The objectives were to present to fishworkers and their organizations an overview of the present trends within the fisheries sector in the province and in the region, and to create opportunities for them to reflect on ways to improve the capacity of artisanal fishing communities to resist adverse developments.

Titled "Fishermen and Fisherwomen Looking for Citizenship in the New Times", the meeting was held in the village of Marudá, a fishing community about 180 km from Belém, the capital of the province of Pará. Sixty people—20 men and 40 women—took part in the meeting. CPP had invited five persons from each of the municipalities where it works directly, or where there are fishworkers organizations and groups, like the ones with which the ICSF-WIF project is working. But some groups sent more than five participants, as they had managed to raise funds themselves for the trip.

A total of 12 groups were present. Most of them stressed that they were looking for alternative means of income generation as well as for means to improve their organization and to create a political voice. They mentioned the environmental problems facing their fisheries and the fact that they have few means to cope with these.

The absence of representatives from *colônias* was significant. Representatives from only three of the *colônias* were present. Only one *colônia* was represented by its president—the *colônia* of Maracanã municipality, whose president, a young woman, is doing a lot of interesting work, such as approaching local schools to teach children more about fishing culture.

*Colônias*—with their past history of military and government intervention—are still recognized as the professional association for fishermen in Brazil. The *colônia* card is accepted as evidence that a person is a fisherman. The presidents of *colônias* have considerable power, and are often propped up by political or economic interest groups. Most of the *colônias* are politically controlled and rarely work to enhance the social and political status of fishworkers. All fishermen are required to be members of *colônias* and to pay regular fees to it, though this is often not the case in practice.

Associations and independent groups develop initiatives that are not usually taken up by *colônias*—economic projects, for instance. But they also take on roles that should belong to the *colônias* or Federations (of *colônias*), such as representing the interests of fishworkers in governmental institutions dealing with credit programs.

At the meeting, it was interesting to observe the growing recognition of women within the fisheries and within the fishworker movement. The initiatives taken by four of the 12 organizations, directly working with women, are described below. It is significant that some of the themes raised by them are not commonly discussed at fisheries-related events.

- ◆ Women's Association, Cachoeira village: The president of this association spoke of the productive credit they have received from a governmental program, to support net weaving and crab processing activities. The group has received no support from the local *colônia*, making the work more difficult. They have problems in obtaining raw material and in accessing better markets.
- ◆ Women's Association, Baía do Sol: The group recalled its recent initiative in organizing a seminar on the social welfare system. The president of this group has herself learnt how to help fishworkers register with IBAMA—the government agency for the environment—a procedure obligatory for anyone in the country engaged in fish harvest.
- ◆ Group Erva Vida and Association of Women from the Fishing Area, Marudá: Both these groups are engaged in the production of traditional medicines. According to the president of the first group, through this work, women have gained self-esteem and autonomy, since domestic work—even if related to fish or to agriculture—does not have

social recognition. The second group shared its plans to support women's efforts to register in the *colônia*, as an initial step towards their greater recognition as fishworkers.

From the meeting, it was evident that women are emerging as political subjects in these communities and in the fishworker movements within the region. It was also evident that they face strong barriers in achieving their objectives—barriers ranging from a lack of recognition of their roles and identity, to their lack of access to education, to markets or to the means for reaching the markets.

Several challenges face the fishworker movements (MONAPE, MOPEPA etc.), and the NGOs that support them, researchers and activists, as well as policymakers: how best to support these individual group initiatives and to integrate them within a sustainable development programme for the coastal region, which is inclusive of men and women, and their communities.