

# A Backbreaking Struggle

**The abject working conditions of the shellfish fisherwomen on the Paraná coast of Brazil call for a revaluation of their work to guarantee them rights and benefits**

**A**lthough women's work in fisheries is diverse and wide and differs by culture and region and between rural and urban areas, the common factor is that it is rarely seen as 'productive'; instead, it is normally seen as an extension of the 'domestic' space. Although 47 per cent of the total workforce in fisheries comes from women, their role is invisible, unrecognized, undervalued and under-represented. This often causes them a denial of labour rights since they are not recognized as professionals in artisanal fishing.

The situation is no different with artisanal shellfish fisherwomen working along the coast of Paraná in Brazil. They have faced difficulties in receiving recognition for their work and in gaining access to their rights. Shellfish fishing occurs mainly in the city of Antonina, but such activity is also found in the municipalities of Guaraqueçaba, Pontal do Paraná and Paranaguá as a means of subsistence for fishing communities. Shellfish extraction has been carried out by digging up the muddy shoals, accessible most of the time by paddle canoes. According to Albertina Batista de Paula, co-ordinator of the Acqua Forum Project (carried out by *Fundacentro*, the state agency of the Ministry of Labour and Employment), this manual digging, with the aid of hoes and shovels, involves the rapid movement of the upper limbs, always from a dorsal position. This repetitive activity places great stress on the muscles of the neck, shoulders, upper and lower back, limbs, and wrists.

According to experts, a shellfish fisherwoman performs approximately 10,200 repetitive movements during catching and 5,040 movements

during processing in a period of one hour, totaling an average of 75,000 repetitive movements in a working day. It has been observed that these figures are comparable to those described in industrial risk situations responsible for generating spinal injuries and repetitive strain injuries. The situation is aggravated if we include housework and the effort exerted in rowing the boat.

According to the Acqua Forum Project, these fisherwomen take about four to five hours to catch shellfish. Another seven hours are needed for

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commuting between their homes and the shoals, for processing and storage of shellfish. These add up to approximately 12 hours of work per day. Once back home, they still have to carry out domestic activities, resulting in an essentially double working day. They do not have holidays or vacations (with the exception of religious holidays), since forgoing working would imply a decrease in the family income.

## Precautions needed

*Fundacentro* recommends a series of precautions that shellfish fishers must adopt to ensure their health, such as protection against solar radiation and taking daily breaks of five to 10 minutes every hour. Although the fisherwomen work through self-management, which makes it possible to take short breaks, each

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pause in a 12-hour workday would stretch their routine by a few hours, something that they cannot afford, since a second workday awaits them at home. The fishermen are thus forced to work even if they have symptoms of repetitive strain injuries or other occupational illnesses resulting from the socioeconomic conditions they are caught in.

It has been estimated that the average income of an Antonina shellfish fisherwoman is around Brazil real (R\$)520 per month. This amount might vary, since, in most cases, they need to hire more women to help them process the catch. After discounting the cost of hired labour, each shellfish fisherwoman earns a monthly income of R\$360, which is well below the Brazilian minimum wage (currently around R\$937 per month). As a result, shellfish fisherwomen are constrained to overwork to avoid hunger in their families. It has been noticed that they hold back from spending on health aid and medicines, neglecting to protect against well-known risks, and continue to work even when sick or in advanced stages of pregnancy—all in order to survive.

The shellfish fisherwomen say that experts from the National Social Security Institute (INSS) ignore their reports about diseases caused by fishing, thus denying them sickness allowances or retirement benefits due as disability compensation. They often face discrimination in INSS and regional labour offices, which deny them documents that would identify them as bona fide fishers. Since INSS experts are shoddy in cases where the medical examination involves a fisherwoman or a fisherman, the community is robbed of health, labour and social-security benefits, which are awarded on professional evidence. Such evidence is hard to come by in artisanal fishing, in general, and becomes particularly more difficult when it comes to women in fishing, whose work is often not recognized even within the fishing community itself.

This lack of recognition is apparent in the paucity of identification

documents that would establish their profession and guarantee their access to labour, social security and insurance rights. Only 30 women in the municipality of Antonina reportedly hold fishing identification documents, although 134 work in fishing-related activities, including in catching, processing and trading fish.

The issue of gender is central to the development of fair and equitable public policies in the fishing sector. Labour issues in artisanal fishing need to take into account the invisibility of women in this sector and its socioeconomic consequences, so that the prevalent framework can be reversed. It is necessary to value, and make visible, the work of fisherwomen so that they can access their rights equitably, and be guaranteed of benefits to compensate for the illnesses and disabilities that result from the occupational hazards of their risky work. 

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