

From Latin America/ Brazil

Who is a fishworker?

A discussion group on gender and fisheries at a recent seminar in Brazil, debated the situation of women of fishing communities

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During the General Assembly of the *Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores* (CPP), held in Lagoa Seca, Paraíba State, Brazil from 17 to 19 November 2000, one of the themes was 'Gender Relations in Fisheries'. A discussion group was formed with 29 participants, most of them women from different fishing communities. There were also support people from NGOs, as well as community and union leaders. This represented a rare opportunity to understand the various ways in which women participate in the fisheries and in fishworker organizations, the difficulties they face in being recognized and valued, as well as to discuss the progress that has been made. Some of the debates are described below.

One of the participants, Mrs. Roquelina Almeida, introduced herself as follows: "fisherwoman, poetess, writer, director of the *colônia* (professional organization of fishermen) of fishermen from Maragogipe, Bahia State, and director of the local association of residents." She said that she had begun fishing since she was a child, but that in her time, "a woman could only be a *marisqueira* (seafood collector). Today, thank God I got the right of being a *pescadora* (fisherwoman)."

A shared view among the participants was that women often do not consider themselves as fishers. According to Mrs. Petrucia, president of the co-operative of Ponto da Barra, Maceió, Alagoas: "women are quiet; they are fisherwomen, but they don't like to participate. However, the men are worse than the women, they participate even less." She emphasized the fragility of the organization of fishermen, an opinion shared by many of those present.

In her turn, a fisherwoman named Lídia, director of the *colônia* of Aranaín in the municipal district of Cachoeira, Pará state, said that in her community progress had been notable. Four of the five directors

in Fortim are presently women (all except for the President).

Mrs. Dolores, sociologist from Instituto Terramar, Ceará state, pointed to the lack of data in governmental bodies, in universities, and in organizations, on the work women do in fisheries. In the municipality of Fortim, for example, women collect seafood and they fish. As a result of the work of the current President of the *colônia*, a woman, there are today about 80 women registered in the *colônia*. In other places in Ceará, some women collect algae and, sometimes, they fish with nets on the shore. The algae has a good market for the cosmetics industry, but the collectors sell this at very low prices. At times this income is the only one for maintaining the family.

Dolores emphasized that many women in fishing communities combine fishing with handicraft and other activities. This makes their official recognition as fishers by the technicians from the welfare institute, difficult. While investigating cases in villages, they have to decide whether the woman applying for retirement or other benefits is a housewife, an embroiderer or a fisher.

The characteristic *machismo* of the *colônia* was described by Francisca Ester of Parajuru, Ceará, President of the local community association. "The only woman who goes to the *colônia* there, is me. You don't see a woman there. I ask the fishermen, please, bring your wives for the *colônia* meetings so they can get informed!" According to Francisca, almost all of the villagers in Parajuru take crabs in the swamps, as well as oysters and *sururus* (small mussels).

Mrs. Cárita Chagas, president of the women's association in the village of Cachoeira, Pará, emphasized the points common to the situation of women across several states. She emphasized that the Mayor of her town and the management of the *colônia* have not showed any interest in complying with the demands of the fishers, men or women, especially of the women. With the support of outsiders, women in her municipality have formed two associations. These women took an active role during the last elections of the *colônia*. "Last year we removed the former President of the *colônia*. The current one is committed and the women have more space inside it. ...The *colônia* of the municipal district was founded 70 years ago. However, it was opened to women only a year

ago. Unfortunately in many cases the barrier is cultural. It is the history of submission that is reproduced.”

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The subject, *who is fisherman or fisherwoman*, raised heated discussions. One of the issues discussed was the status of the women who weave nets, salt fish, take care of the fishing equipment and other related tasks. Who are they? Do they have to be recognized as fishworkers? In fact, they are not considered legally as fishworkers.

In this context it was noted that in this discussion group on gender, there were hardly a few men. This was seen as indicative of the fact that within the category of fishermen, the discussion on such issues still interests only the women and is not seen as a priority.

The participants of this mini-seminar presented their ‘histories’. In spite of the progress that has been made, their testimonies showed that while women work, and have always worked, their work remains largely invisible.

The seminar pointed to the urgent need to produce data concerning women’s work in the fisheries, and the links between fishing and other related work. If the statistics on fisheries are poor, on the work of women in the fisheries, they are absent. The traditional approach that regards women’s works as ‘complementary’ reinforces this invisibility.

The testimonies at the seminar made it clear that women in fishing communities undertake different activities, unlike the fishermen, who tend to be specialized (net fishermen, fixed-trap fishermen, lobster fishermen etc). Women:

- fish in several ways (the *marisqueira* also fishes)
- collect algae
- weave and repair fishing nets
- take up other activities through the year (embroidery, craft, agriculture...)
- participate in community work (like for instance, in the residents’ associations in Ceará they have taken up the fight against land speculation).

It was clear that the barriers remain. Many participants referred to the weight of the ‘cultural issue’. And, in Brazil, several social benefits are linked to the status of a person as a worker. The need to change this situation was stressed, because it is source of social exclusion.