

Weaving a living

The women net weavers of Vigia in Brazil face a bleak future, as modern developments overshadow their traditional skills

In numerous countries, the presence of women is felt more in post-harvest activities in fisheries. However, in the port of Vigia in the province of Para in Brazil, women have only a minor role in this area. The majority of them weave fishing nets.

This activity is perceived as being just a part of routine domestic activities like managing the house, cooking, looking after the children and maintaining the kitchen garden. This is because it is done at home and only after all the daily chores have been carried out.

The women of Vigia do not know how to repair nets, nor do they try to learn to do so. They say that repairing is much more difficult than weaving; that is why it is left to the men.

But the fact is that it is a result of the division of labour dictated by constraints of space and occupation. As it is not necessary to have a large area to weave, this activity keeps the women at home and limits their movements. In contrast, repairing of nets requires vast spaces and is a domain of men.

This spatial division springs from cultural norms prevalent in Vigia. These are sometimes applied with rigour. Some fishermen choose to live in greater difficulty than accept the fact that their wives work out in the open.

Men are deemed to have a role to play, which is to fulfill economic obligations. But a woman's revenue is often viewed as a supplement to her husband's salary. However, in numerous communities, they contribute to a large, if not greater extend, to the family's resources, since the

fisherman's revenue is by nature uncertain.

Since the market for female labour is very weak in Vigia and orders for weaving nets are becoming very rare, the women have come up with different strategies to survive. They wash clothes or cook for others, while those who have a refrigerator—which is even rarer—sell ice cream or cold juices, and some other sell corn soup. They also undertake some harvest activities in shallow-water fisheries—on banks of river or near the beach, the high seas being a fishing territory reserved for men.

In Vigia, some women harvest the *siri* crab in the river, the *turu* mollusc and the *caranguejo* crab in the mangrove, by setting traps along the banks. They fish individually or in the company of their husbands, fathers or friends, mainly to nourish their families, but eventually to sell their produce. This money earned enables them to survive when their husbands are at sea.

These incursions into the world of fisheries are, however, very limited. Many women remain at home. Their daily activities continue to be preparing meals, washing clothes, fetching water, weaving nets, making ice, etc. All these are activities which retain them in the world of women.

Although the weaving of nets enables the women of Vigia to play a role in the fisheries economy of their community, their work is still not recognized as being a true profession.

Professionalism rare

Rare are those who speak of a 'profession' and who think of enrolling in a

professional organization such as the colia (an organization aimed at registering fishermen and collecting subscriptions for retirement benefits) or IBAMA (Brazilian Institute for the Protection of Environment) which grants permission to fish. It is difficult to estimate the number of weavers in Vigia since all the women from a family invariably know how to weave.

This source of income—meagre but essential for the maintenance of an economic balance—is, however, being threatened now. Plastic nets, made in China, are slowly replacing the traditional nylon nets. Although female labour is cheap, it can not compete with the production costs of industrial net manufacture.

What impact will the introduction of new technology have on female employment? Will the consequences be identical to those already observed in other areas of the world where unemployment has become rampant: the disappearance of women weavers, or a greater exploitation of female labour? These are the questions that will plague the women of Vigia in the years to come.

This article is written by Christine Escallier, ethnologist, and Maria Cristina Maneschy, sociologist and the Brazil co-ordinator of the Women of Fisheries Project of ICSF. It is translated by Malavika Shivakumar.