

# Making their Voices Heard

**Fisherwomen in Brazil have organized themselves to demand recognition of their work and rights in the fisheries and, slowly, the government is being forced to listen**

By **Naina Pierri** (naina@cem.ufpr.br), a sociologist and professor at the Federal University of Parana, Brazil, and **Natália Tavares de Azevedo** (nataliatavares@ufpr.br), a sociology student working for a doctorate in environment and development at the Federal University of Parana

Women fishers in Brazil have come a long way. The turning point in their recent history was in 1985 when a fishermen's *colônia* elected a woman as its president. By 1994, another woman had been elected to head a State federation of *colônias*. A decade or so later, in 2006, in a move that marked the coming of age of women in the continental and coastal fisheries, a national-level network, the National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil (ANP), was created.

The network recently held its second meeting, from 4 to 8 May 2010, in the town of Fortim, in Ceará State. The meeting was attended by about 60 fisherwomen from 12 of the 26 States in Brazil, as well as by researchers, advisers and supporters. Readers might remember that the first meeting of the network was held four years ago, in April 2006. It emerged from a process of campaigning for the formal recognition of women's contributions to fisheries and aquaculture.

In 2003, the First National Conference on Aquaculture and Fisheries, organized by the Brazilian government, had ignored the role

of women. Reacting sharply to this, women fishers demanded that a meeting to address their specific issues be held. The government consented by convening the First National Meeting of Women Workers in Fisheries and Aquaculture in 2004. This provided the context for women's mobilization, and led to the formulation of a set of demands that challenged the basis for women's invisibility in the sector. This important document was approved in 2006, under pressure from women fishers, at the Second National Conference of Aquaculture and Fisheries.

The recent political mobilization of women fishers is also linked to the organizational revitalization of the artisanal fisheries sector in Brazil. When the government held its third National Conference on Aquaculture and Fisheries in September 2009, an important part of the organized artisanal sector chose to boycott the conference, and held a parallel meeting instead. This boycott was provoked by a loss of faith. Attending the national conference, it was felt, would provide legitimacy to the very government that was marginalizing the artisanal sector through its policies. This then was the overall context in which the second meeting of the ANP was held. The meeting had three major components.

The first consisted of providing information on certain general issues in order to enrich the discussion and contribute to the political development of the present leaders. The topics were: feminism; historical overview of women's struggles globally and in Brazil; occupational health of women in fishing; gender analysis of women's work in fishing; and the need for fishing closure periods, as a conservation strategy, specifically targeting the species captured by fisherwomen.

The second was a dialogue with representatives from the Ministry of Agrarian Development, the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Ministry of Social Security, and the Secretariat of Policies for Women, who answered questions about the various policies applicable to artisanal fishing. The issues discussed included the lack of recognition of work; labour rights and social security for women in the sector; difficulty of access to credit for fisheries; and lack of

NAINA PIERRI



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access guarantee and livelihood security for fishing communities.

The third and main part of the meeting focused on organizational issues of the ANP, its present situation and perspectives. Organizational problems were analyzed, and strategies at the State and national levels were debated. The meeting decided to enlarge the scope of national co-ordination, with representation from all the States present. Dates for subsequent State and national-level co-ordination meetings were decided.

The meeting acknowledged the progress made by fisherwomen since 2006 in gaining recognition for their work. A working paper on women not directly employed in fishing, but participating in activities along the fisheries production chain, had led to the legislation of the New General Law on Fisheries in 2009. This law, however, is not sufficient for the real and complete recognition of fisherwomen's rights.

The meeting reaffirmed the goals for struggle raised in 2006. These included: strengthening the identity of fisherwomen; struggling against discrimination and violence at work and other places; struggling for labour and social-security rights; demanding a public policy on health, education and housing; demanding the right of access to land and water; preserving natural resources; and, finally, struggling against environmentally and socially damaging projects, such as the uncontrolled spread of shrimp farming.

The meeting discussed the future goals for women in the fisheries. On labour rights and social security, the women reaffirmed

the general need for respect and recognition and, specifically, the need for recognition of occupational diseases and access to health and disability insurance. The struggle for land and water was now redefined as a struggle to defend access to fishing territories and obtain formal property rights for land in fishing areas. A new goal set at the meeting was to enlarge the scope of fishing bans to include not only fish of high commercial value but also varieties of fish that women typically harvest and, therefore, need protection. This last is a particularly important goal because it means that, in certain cases, women could also be eligible for fishing ban insurance during periods of restricted fishing.

Analyzing strengths and future prospects, it was pointed out that a key strength of the ANP is its political and financial autonomy from the government. Other important strengths are its growing maturity and critical political comprehension, the centrality of grassroots-level mobilization and also its democratic form of functioning and decisionmaking. Finally, a commitment to life and to build solidarity is a crucial strength.

There is today an enlarged group of leadership from an important part of Brazil to take forward the struggle of fisherwomen. There is a need to build alliances with other social movements, including the women's movement and the peasants' movement. The challenge for this national organization is to continue participating in the struggle "without fear of being women", as reflected in their songs and practice! ❏