



PROFILE

Marta Machazec Serrutt

In Panamá, the persistent efforts of a courageous woman go a long way in bolstering the dignity of fishworkers, their incomes and conditions of work

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Fifty-year-old Marta Machazec is the President of the Artisanal Bocatoreños Fishermen Union, and one of the leaders of the Federation of Associations and Cooperatives of Artisanal Fishers of Panamá (FENAPESCA). She lives in Almirante, a township created by the North American United Fruit Company as a port for the export of plantains, now a bustling city at Almirante Bay, near the Bocas del Toro Archipelago in the northwest coast of Panamá. The population of Almirante is mainly composed of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants. The beautiful

traits of this ethnic mix are clearly visible in Marta, who, as her surname reveals, also has some Polish ancestry. Marta's multi-ethnic identity seems to have filled her with the courage and dreams of her ancestors who travelled across the oceans in search of a better life.

Marta is the daughter and granddaughter of artisanal fishermen. As a child, she would go fishing with her father in a rowing boat, and, as a teenager, with her brother, without parental permission. They fished with lines and harpoons, diving without oxygen equipment. She experienced the passion and anguish of the fishery profession, seeing the difficulties her father went through to sell the fish they caught, and the little money he received in exchange.

Marta went to the capital to study pedagogy, but soon came back to her town. She married, had a son, and now works as teacher in a primary school. But Marta came back with another big dream. Worried by the situation of the artisanal fishers, in 1999, she took the initiative to form a fishers' association. She looked for the legal documents and elaborated a project that she presented to the Japanese embassy. Through the embassy, she obtained 10 motorized boats for the association members who did not own boats, and also some money to construct a landing centre.

The association collected capital through sale of 'actions' or membership rights for US\$100, bought mainly by the associates. To avoid the concentration of power and safeguard collective interests, no associate could buy more than three actions or sell the actions to third parties. Today, the association has 39 actionist associates, and, between them, they divide the profit obtained. But the beneficiaries are not only these 39 people; the association has 156 actionist and non-actionist associates who sell their produce to the association at prices better than those offered by the trading intermediaries. They also receive credit for buying equipment, ice and food at subsidized prices when they go to sea. The fish is sold fresh locally, and whatever is left over is sold in the nearby localities, and in restaurants and supermarkets.

Twenty-five of the 156 members are women, 15 of whom are also actionists. These women also process fish to make nuggets and hamburgers that are sold by the association locally. They are planning to increase production, and to obtain a sanitary certification.

The association also runs two conservation projects: one for the regeneration of mangroves; the other to repopulate marine wildlife and repair the damaged natural reefs with artificial reefs made of bamboo, lime and cement.

Although Marta has been the main person guiding the association, she has been its president for the last two years only. For 10 years before that, she was treasurer, while the positions of president and secretary were occupied by men. It was felt that in those roles women would not be able to command respect. As president today, Marta knows that she is being granted belated recognition but she is also aware that the role has come to her because there was no other capable man available. As she says this, she smiles, looking afar with the pain of knowing that she is discriminated against as a woman, but also with the patient tolerance that comes from her profound love of fisherfolk. Marta is indeed a humble and great leader of the fishers of her community, and has been able to unite them and give them dignity through her work. ■