

# Gaining ground

**The Fourth Meeting of the National Fisherwomen's Articulation strongly defends Brazil's fisheries and the rights of the country's fisherwomen**

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**A**round 80 fisherwomen from 14 out of the 26 States in Brazil met in Pontal de Paraná, a beach town on the Paraná coast in the South Region of the country, from 25 to 29 August for the Fourth Meeting of the National Fisherwomen's Articulation (ANP; please note that all acronyms in this article are based on Portuguese names). This meeting, held once every two years, aimed to take stock of the ground covered since the ANP was set up in 2006, and to define priorities and strategies for the next phase.

The meeting's agenda combined a range of activities and issues. There were thematic panels, in which invitees from government bodies, researchers and support organizations participated. The issues addressed were: health of fisherwomen; access to social security; closed season for species harvested by fisherwomen; and formal recognition of the work of women in fisheries by their inclusion in the General Register of Fisheries Activity (RGP). The

Voluntary Guidelines recently approved in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for Securing Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication—the SSF Guidelines—and their approach to gender were presented.

Narratives presented in working groups and plenary discussions enabled participants to recall their struggle, the historic moment of the creation of the Articulation, and the successes achieved since 2006, while discussing outstanding demands. Based on this, and keeping the current political context in mind, they defined priorities for their mobilizations in the coming period as well as the measures required to broaden and strengthen the movement. The meeting ended with a statement that synthesized these key points.

The issue of fisherwomen's health has been the centrepiece of the ANP's struggle in recent years. Putting pressure on the Health Ministry (MS) enabled certain joint actions to be undertaken that led to advances in the recognition of occupational illnesses of fisherwomen, and their access to the public health system. The progress made in the prevention and treatment of specific ailments, along with the recognition of these ailments by the social security system is helping to facilitate women's access to a range of benefits.

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Martilene Rodrigues and others at Pontal de Paraná meeting of ANP. Narratives presented in working groups and plenary discussions enabled participants to recall their struggle, the historic moment of the creation of the Articulation

The fisherwomen, along with members of the MS present, discussed key developments in the session titled “Participation in and control of the Public Health System (SUS): Progress and Challenges towards Guaranteeing the Health of Fisherwomen”. The SUS is the public health system through which everyone in Brazil has the right (in theory) to free medical attention including consultation, examinations, hospitalization and medication.

The fisherwomen began by underlining the importance of a training course dealing with the occupational ailments of women, in which 45 women from 11 states took part. This training course was to be replicated in other parts of the country with MS support. Fisherwomen and MS representatives also shared the participation of the ANP in the Grupo Terra or Earth Group. This group brings together members of the MS, social movements and research bodies. Its mandate includes the formulation of the National Policy for Comprehensive Health Care for Farming, Forest and Fishing Communities, that intends to improve the health of these communities through effective access to the SUS, and the reduction of work related risks. The engagement of fisherwomen in the Grupo Terra has been fundamental for the inclusion of the specific needs of fishing communities in this policy.

The creation of ten new Health Referral Centres for Rural Workers was highlighted. The new centres will directly target farmers, fishers and the forest population to prevent illness and accidents at work, and train and sensitize health workers on how to treat and correctly report cases.

The participation of fisherwomen in the Municipal Health Councils was also discussed. These councils are collegiate bodies constituted by representatives of organized society (50 percent), health workers (25 percent) and government representatives and service providers (25 percent). The Councils help formulate strategies, and apply social controls to the implementation of health policy. Because fisherwomen had participated in these spaces, their work, health problems and relations with the environment were now better understood, forcing the health units to produce documentation that made their situation more visible.

Finally, the importance of recognizing fishing territories and the lives and work of fishing communities as a basic precondition for comprehensive health was highlighted. Comprehensive health, it was noted, needed to be understood as physical, mental and

social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease.

The various panels discussed the difficulties fisherwomen had in trying to access social security. The fisherwomen had formally requested the Social Security Ministry (MPS) and the Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministry (MPA) to participate in the panel discussions. Rather than sending federal agents, these Ministries sent local and state level agents who were neither informed nor able to reply to questions posed by the fisherwomen. Even worse, the MPA representative brought bibles and kitchen aprons as presents, implying that cooking and prayer were more appropriate for women than discussing policy. The fisherwomen’s reaction was emphatic; the principle of secularism (a principle of the Brazil Constitution) had been violated, and the government had thus clearly demonstrated their lack of recognition and respect for this national social movement.

The Social Security Institute (INSS), responsible for paying pensions, death, sickness, accident and other benefits, took part in the panel titled “Social Security: Recognition, secure rights, and elimination of discrimination”. Fisherwomen highlighted a series of complaints. These included excessive requirements for proof of their activities; lack of recognition for specific work-related ailments; corrupt practices; lack of preparation on the part of the agents attending to the fisherwomen; and discrimination and institutional racism practiced by specialist doctors certifying cases worthy of social benefits and other actors.

As the representative of the MPA had already left, only fisherwomen participated in the panel titled “RGP: Recognition and secure access for women”. The panel drew attention to the failure to regulate the Article in the recently-introduced Fisheries Law of 2009 that broadened the concept of fisheries to include pre- and post-harvest activities. While the legislation allowed women to be recognized as professional fisherwomen, its implementation was inadequate. Another problem highlighted was the MPA’s requirement for annual renewal of the General Register of Fisheries Activity (RGP) as the Ministry was not adequately structured to process the paperwork every year, and fishers were hard-pressed to travel from their places of work to the Ministry offices.

The panel titled “Species caught by fisherwomen: research, and fixing the closed season” had a presentation from a participant from the MPA and one from a woman researcher who presented the case of Para State. The fisherwomen proposed that the

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government should establish a closed season for the species they target to ensure sustainability. Currently, the closed season is restricted to only the species of greatest commercial importance and caught by men. In addition, they said that the closed season does not serve its purpose as the period of closure is inadequate because it does not heed fishers' knowledge.

There was a session titled "SSF Guidelines and Gender Issues". The process leading up to the adoption of the SSF Guidelines and the role played by civil society organizations was explained, highlighting, in particular, the participation of fishermen and fisherwomen from Brazil. The role and rights of women as addressed in the SSF Guidelines was also explained. Discussions underlined the need to press the government to implement the SSF Guidelines at the national level. This would not be easy, given that the current government promotes aquaculture and industrial fishing at the expense of artisanal fisheries.

The session ended with an emotional tribute to Chandrika Sharma. Her dedication to defending artisanal fisheries and the rights of women fishworkers was highlighted. An image was displayed with the text "Chandrika lives and will live on in the struggles of artisanal fisherwomen and fishermen!"

At the end of the meeting, there were retrospective discussions on the road taken by the ANP which identified successes at different levels. The professional recognition of fisherwomen by the new fisheries law was highlighted together with the progress made towards recognizing occupational

health problems and also fisherwomen's participation in the social control of the public health system. Fisherwomen talked about the freedom they had gained from getting out of their houses to participate in the movement. They gained access to information and political training which enabled them to effectively participate in the collective struggle.

The fisherwomen set out their main demands for the next period. These included the protection of traditional fishing territories; putting labour rights and social protection into practice; recognizing occupational ailments; and establishing a closed season for fishery species targeted by women with a guaranteed compensation.

To take these demands forward women emphasized the need to strengthen the organization at the level of States, generate and train more leaders; and improve internal and external communication of the ANP, in order to improve interactions between fisherwomen and give them greater visibility in the society. They also decided to hold the next national meeting, scheduled for 2016, in the State of Maranhão.

The final statement ended with a dedication that expressed the strength and warrior spirit of Brazilian fisherwomen's social movement: "In memory of Chandrika Sharma, strong defender of artisanal fisheries and the rights of women, and in memory of our ancestors, we will forge ahead, until all artisanal fisherwomen have secure rights that are put into practice and until artisanal fishing is free from the impositions of the agro-business and hydro-business." ■