

# Equal Rights, Unequal Access

**A new fisheries law in Brazil recognizes, for the first time, fisherwomen as workers. But they need to come up to speed to take advantage of the associated work-related benefits**

By **Sueli Miranda** (cpp@cnb2.org.br) co-ordinator, Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP) Northern Region, and **Maria Cristina Maneschy**, (cristina@ufpa.br) Professor of Sociology, Federal University of Pará

Pará is one of Brazil's main fish-producing States, where artisanal fisheries occupy a very significant economic, social and cultural position. Recently, a meeting organized in Belém, the capital of Pará, by a local organization, the Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP), brought together 19 women of fishing communities from the Lower Amazon Region and from Marajó Island at the mouth of the Amazon.

A very encouraging development was that local *colônias* were represented by women—something that has rarely happened in the past. The three fishermen's *colônias* that participated were Abaetetuba, Mosqueiro and São Sebastião da Boa Vista. Several community organizations were also present. They included the Association of Artisanal Fishermen and Extractivists from Boa Vista, the Association of Women Fishworkers and Farmers from Baía do Sol (Mosqueiro), the Association of Fishermen and Farmers from Aricuru (Maracanã), and the Association of Domestic Women from Santarém.

The proceedings started with a review of the objectives of the meeting. An important aim was to elect delegates from Pará to participate at the next meeting of the National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil (ANP), scheduled to take place in early May in Ceará State. The other important objective was to hold focused discussions on certain themes. These included: the concerns of women as fishworkers, and as members of communities and organizations; initiatives taken in relation to these concerns; existing fishery policies and their effectiveness; and finally, strategies to deal with these concerns.

At the first session, Sueli Miranda of the CPP explored the question of feminine identity in relation to culture and the way of life in fisheries. After reading from a text titled "Who are you?", she discussed the historical development of gender inequalities, which has led to the contemporary situation of equal rights but unequal access for men and women.

Following this, Maria Cristina Maneschy made a presentation on the new Fisheries Law, in effect in Brazil since June 2009, which, by redefining artisanal fishing to include pre- and post-harvest tasks, opens up a window of professional recognition for women engaged in these activities. In the discussion that followed, some apprehensions were voiced about the scope for middlemen to take undue advantage because of the way the law was worded, but everyone agreed on its potential benefits for women.

The next session on labour and welfare rights attracted a good deal of audience attention. Ana Maria Santa Brígida, from the National Institute of Social Security, explained Brazil's social welfare system, focusing, in particular, on the schemes that applied to small-scale fisheries. Maternity leave, retirement schemes, pension, and sickness and accident indemnities were the main topics of interest. These welfare benefits have been in force for over 20 years but to avail of them requires the right connections within the bureaucracy in cities. There is also much paperwork involved in obtaining an individual worker number, an identification card, proof of fishing experience, and so on. For women, furnishing such proof is sometimes quite difficult. It was informed that purchase slips for fishing gear that mention the women's name, or a child's school enrollment certificate that mentions the parent's profession, may be used in the absence of direct identity proof.

Aladim Alfaia, longtime co-ordinator of the Brazilian National Fishermen Movement (MONAPE), talked about the unemployment insurance scheme for artisanal fishermen—an allowance that is provided to fishers in areas where the four-month fisheries ban is enforced every year. Although it had come into being as a result of a strong movement led by MONAPE, CPP and fishermen's unions and associations, the scheme had fallen prey to corrupt practices. Many outside the fisheries were trying to take advantage of the four-month allowance. The example of a municipality in

Pará State was cited, whose fishermen population, according to the official demographic census, is 2,900; however, the *colônia* records almost twice these numbers—

5,742—as fishermen. The very purpose of the policy is thus thwarted.

On the second day of the meeting the guest speaker was Cárita Rosa das Chagas, who grew up in a coastal fishing village and today works in the State Secretariat of Fisheries and Aquaculture. She also has a seat in the Women's Rights Council of Pará State. Cárita emphasized the many changes that had taken place in the lives of women who had clearly gained visibility as income earners and as participants in the political arena. Fisherwomen's movements have engaged the government in dialogue and have participated actively in national conferences on fisheries and aquaculture organized by the government. However, the policies in place are still far from adequate, and fisherwomen would have to mobilize in large numbers for better access to basic services such as healthcare.

Subsequently, the participants split up into smaller, region-based groups for focused discussions on the previously-agreed themes. The group from the Lower Amazon River presented the main points of their discussion in a most interesting manner, in the form of a radio interview. One of their chief concerns was the lack of medical attention and proper healthcare services in the region. This was a severe problem particularly because women were frequently reporting cases of skin, breast and uterine cancer. Another concern was the inability of women to prove their professional status as fishworkers and hence benefit from the fishing ban allowance. "A woman has to smell of fish to prove she is a fisherwoman. There is discrimination in the State offices. Women also discriminate against each other," the group said. The dumping of untreated pollutants into rivers was another major concern. Participants shared some of the interesting initiatives they have undertaken in recycling waste and monitoring the environment.

The group of women shrimp fishers from Marajó Island, who fish daily for both income and household consumption, said that their difficulties were related mainly to marketing shrimp. Living along rivers in rural areas far from the city, they were forced to

depend on middlemen. They faced problems of transportation and theft of fish traps. When they go to the city markets, they take along shrimp as well as fruit from their gardens to sell. Some reported having regular customers who placed orders on the phone in cities like Belém. The women would then depend on workers they knew in the boat lines to deliver these orders. The group mentioned that an ice factory was coming up in their municipality, to be managed by a local association of fishers, and they hoped it would help them preserve their catches. The group ended their report by stressing the need for women to fight for their rights.

The third group consisted of women from Mosqueiro Island, near the capital city Belém, and from the community of Aricuru, in Maracanã municipality. This group put up a parody which depicted the poor health infrastructure and the lack of organization in many fishermen *colônias*. The shortage of fish supplies was a critical concern for this group, which is now exploring possible avenues of alternative employment such as manufacturing fishing gear and sewing.

In the final session, the participants received detailed information regarding the meeting of the National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil (ANP) scheduled for the first week of May 2010 in Ceará State. Four women were chosen as delegates to this meeting. Another important decision was to schedule the next meeting of fisherwomen from Pará State for September 2010.

In their feedback, participants felt that more time should have been devoted to questions from the audience and for discussion. A suggestion for the next meeting was to include a specific session on occupational diseases and injuries, which would help fisherwomen claim insurance benefits in a better-informed manner. The participants were full of praise for the good organizational arrangements that had been made for the meeting, and felt they were taking back a lot of positive messages to share with the other women of their communities. ❏