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From invisible work to collective action: research and participation with women from the fishing communities of the Amazonian coast

Maria-Luzia Miranda Alvares and Maria-Cristina Maneschky

• Introduction

This article describes a project, which started in November 1995, at the Philosophy and Human Sciences Centre the Federal University of Pará (UFPA-Brazil). The project aimed to characterise the roles of women in the families of local fishers, in the fishing productive system and in the fishing communities. Usually these roles are not visible, as women undertake multiple activities and, especially in the rural areas, many of their tasks are undertaken outside the commercial sphere and are geared towards producing goods for the family.

The objective of connecting research and development action was made possible through a project 'Status and Roles of Women in Fishing in the State of Pará (Brazilian Amazon): studies and participation'¹. In 1995, this project was submitted to the Women in Fishing (WIF) programme of the International Collective in Support of Fish Workers (an NGO based in India) for funding and advice. This programme was active during 1993-1996 and included: a study of the history of the role of women in fishing, a record of their struggle against exclusion from society and an examination of how fishing organisations can integrate gender perspectives into their struggle for survival.

Since we joined WIF, we have encouraged the organisation and political participation of women. The methodology includes:

- the provision of useful information and opportunities for discussing the problems of families who depend on fishing;
- the dissemination of research data in the localities; and,
- the promotion of technical and political training courses.

• The coast of Pará

On the coast of the State of Pará, fishing is an important activity. It is estimated that 55% of the nearly 100,000 fishers in the State live on the coast. The fishing fleet is large: 3,697 vessels, according to a recent survey. The fleet consists of small boats: 57% of the vessels are either rowing boats or small sailing boats and 28% are motor boats less than 12 m long.

Although fishers are a major contributor to the economy of Pará, their socio-economic situation is difficult: 75% of fishers earn less than three times the minimum wage. They have no control over the resale of their produce. They depend on merchant intermediaries for fish distribution and for access to credit. We also have to consider the effects of industrial fishing which has operated in the Amazon river system since 1969. Industrial fishing uses 20 ton vessels with mechanised non-selective trawl-nets and has greatly increased the pressure on resources.

¹ This project was originally set up by Lourdes Furtado, anthropologist and co-ordinator of RENAS Project and by Maria Cristina Maneschky.

Target communities

Fishing is the main source of income for the communities, Baía do Sol, Vigia and Pereru where the project operates. Baía do Sol, on Mosqueiro Island, is an old fishing village. The local people estimate that it has around 4,000 inhabitants. In Baía do Sol there are 'pure' fishers, as they refer to themselves, and fishers who undertake other activities. The increase in tourism and industrial fishing has encouraged jobs in the building industry and in the public sector. Women have found jobs, primarily as domestic servants, 'housekeepers' and in schools and health clinics. Women need these forms of employment and complain about the small catches of fish which their husbands bring from the sea.

In an attempt to characterise the women's activities on land, we started by examining activities that are not usually considered to be associated with fishing. The women from Baía do Sol fish using lines and small nets. They also usually clean and salt fish, make and mend nets, and sew small sails. These activities are done for the family. A few sell the fish caught by their relatives.

Vigia is a city of nearly 30,000 inhabitants. It is the main coastal port where fish is landed. Around 3,000 fishers are registered in the fishing headquarters. Of these, only 12 are women.

Women and children have few options for employment in Vigia. Construction of fishing nets is an important activity and as most women come from fishing communities, they know how to make nets. Boat owners and shops that sell fishing implements learned a long time ago to utilise women's cheap labour. Women work from home, fitting the net making in between domestic chores. Women are paid according to the lengths of net made. The price varies from one contractor to another.

There is little mention of this work in the local associations, yet it involves hundreds of women. As making nets is not considered a fishing activity, the women do not have any of the social security rights of the professional fishers.

In Pereru there are 500 people whose survival depends on fishing, farming and catching crabs in the mangroves. As in the other areas, the gender division of labour is well defined: the men go fishing at sea and catch crabs. The women work in the fields but rely on men to help with the 'heavy jobs' (clearing and burning the forest). Some women fish in the rivers and mangroves. Because of the limited and uncertain income generated by sea fishing, their contribution through agriculture and small scale fishing is essential for the upkeep of families.

Apart from some problems specific to the locality, fishers in these three places face similar problems: a lack of means of keeping and processing their produce; a lack of access to commercial credit to keep or increase their productive units; the high cost of the inputs compared with the low price they get for their fish; the theft of fishing nets in widely used fishing areas; and competition with motorised trawl-nets boats.

In this context, the WIF project aimed to bring the women fishers together and provide them with ways of expressing their opinions and problems. These actions were seen as a way of strengthening the fishing profession, by increasing the fishers' information and awareness about their rights as citizens.

• Building channels of participation

Vigia

Activities were planned to build or strengthen channels for political participation by women in fishing communities. The first of these activities was a large meeting of women in the city of Vigia. The follow-up activities sought to put into practice the ideas and proposals raised in this meeting in February 1996. The 'Meeting of Women in Fishing' was promoted by two researchers, C. Escalier and M.C. Maneschy, together with local organisations.

The main theme, 'social security rights of workers in fishing', was crucial. Many professionals were unaware of the subject and about the important changes taking place in the

social security system in Brazil. A group of youths from the local parish prepared a play portraying a critical reflection of daily life in a fisher's house. Women of some standing in the community were also invited to speak. We provided transport, food and a nursery to allow mothers with small children to attend.

The presence of 107 women and six men from different localities made the meeting a great success. We were aware however, that it was important to mobilise women to attend. Many who had shown a strong interest in attending the meeting did not come. They claimed excuses such as 'my husband arrived from a fishing trip'; 'I have a lot of clothes to wash'; 'I have to prepare the children's breakfast'. In other words, they put forward social and moral restrictions that reinforced their silence and isolation.

At the meeting it was decided to create a women's association. To advance the proposal, a committee of 11 women was established. This indicated the desire of the participants to get the process moving. The tendency to hurry the process caused difficulties for the organisation later on.

It became clear that many women had come to the meeting looking for job opportunities. Although they valued new knowledge, contacts and the excitement of a 'different day', we cannot deny that the lack of direct benefits had certainly disappointed many women. Some who joined the committee later abandoned the group, although others joined to take their places. Pressed by domestic duties, lack of money, everyday problems or resistance from their husbands, it was difficult to maintain their motivation to fight against the many exclusions that affect them.

In summary, despite the interest in the meeting and its follow-up, the obstacles against its continuation were considerable. The project's subsequent actions were thus geared towards maintaining the fragile beginnings of the women's organisation. Smaller meetings, exchanges between this organisation and others from further afield, training courses, writing of manifestos and the proposal of a constitution, were all introduced to sustain the enthusiasm.

Amongst the impediments to maintaining women's participation, we can highlight some key factors: their poverty, the difficulties they have in going out, the lack of a support team for the project, loss of contact with communities further afield, and the weakness of the associations involved in the organisation of the meetings. The lack of commitment of the local elite was noticeable. They provided little support for a movement of poor women. By trying to build a political representation channel, we upset certain practices which are prevalent in political relations in the interior of Brazil, where votes are exchanged for personal favours.

The lack of knowledge regarding basic rights in jobs, health and education helps perpetuate the inequalities and social, economic and political dependence of the fishing communities of the region. The women also have the problems of gender discrimination, although their potential to react to such conditions was considerable, as we witnessed on several occasions, during meetings and field work.

The process of building a collective women's organisation in fishing communities stimulated the emergence of critical reflections about their life conditions. It also created opportunities for them to analyse their specific contribution to fishing, as well as to examine their relationships with their husbands.

Baía do Sol

The experiences in Baía do Sol are more recent. At the beginning of the research in January 1997, the team centred their actions in the local fishers' colony. One of the first questions raised by the president of the organisation, and by the women present, regarded the tangible changes we would bring. The talks we had in further meetings were mainly regarding complaints about the decline of the community due to the impact of industrial fishing. Indeed, of 40 boats, only 8 were in use. The merchant intermediaries were not seen as 'monsters', but as 'saviours'.

Since this research started, we received requests for training courses in boat-building to help women repair damaged boats. This showed the urgency of the fishers' situation

and how women were involved with this concern. We also noted that there were great expectations of what the WIF programme would contribute to projects, in terms of boats and nets. In further contacts with the women, we discovered their interest in crafts, such as embroidery, dressmaking and sweet making.

During the field work, we also became aware of a Mother's Club, which at the time was not active. The women remembered that when it had been active, there were many group activities. The team of researchers opted, therefore, to bring this club together periodically, to find out their needs, desires and to revive their association. In the first meeting with a 'motivator' (a sociologist employed by the project), several subjects that they wanted to discuss came to light. The subject of 'women's health' aroused the most interest.

• **Challenges for the women in fishing programme**

The major objective for the women is to gain a better standard of living for their families. We are starting to guide discussions with the local groups in this direction, thinking about preparing projects to help generate work and income. As a first step, the WIF programme is acting as an intermediary between training organisations in the public sector and local women. Courses that the women requested are being organised, such as fish processing, small business management, dressmaking, alternative food and home vegetable gardens. Discussions are also arranged on specific themes, such as women's health.

As the experience of how an organisation works is quite new for the women, it has been a delicate task to reconcile their desire for immediate results with the necessity to strengthen the organisation. On the other hand, to highlight the 'economic' aspect of collective organisation brings the risk of de-politicising the process and attracting people with more individual interests.

In the communities, the groups involved in building a women's association are isolated from professional organisations of fishers and the municipal administration. But where

should we start? With the activities by which they intend to improve their subsistence or with the discussions of their problems and the cause of them?

We believe that both approaches are important to start building participatory actions in the community. This finding is reflected in the aim of the team, which is to get closer to the women's groups and strengthen the existing groups, such as the 'Mother's Clubs'. This should facilitate an effective partnership which could improve the local standard of living, something to which the women greatly aspire.

It is important to highlight that contributing to the groups is a two-way process for us as researchers. We gain a richer perception of the social reality. The interaction we are searching for is very new to us. Taking into consideration the limited resources available for the research, there is a risk of creating more expectations than is possible to deliver within the limits of the project. Another great difficulty is our status as 'strangers' who in a certain way 'are invading' culturally-established spaces and practices in the communities. We hope to be able to reduce these distances through a dynamic process of familiarisation in the communities.

- **Maria Luzia Miranda Alvares**, Political Science Department, UFPA, Brazil (luzia@supridad.com.br) **and** **Maria Cristina Maneschy**, Sociology Department, UFPA, Brazil (cristina@ufpa.br).

NOTE

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