

Voices of fisheries leadership

This interview with **Josana Pinto da Costa** (josanaserrao@gmail.com), Member of the National Coordination Committee of the Movement of Artisanal Fishermen and Fisherwomen (Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais -MPP), Óbidos, Pará, Brazil, was conducted by **N.Venugopalan** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Manager, ICSF, on 18 October, 2024, with help from **Sofia Norton** (sofia.norton@sapo.pt), Translator and Interpreter, Lisbon, Portugal

Q. *It's noteworthy that the Movement of Artisanal Fishermen and Fisherwomen of Brazil (MPP) includes both men and women, unlike many other organizations. The MPP was created to amplify the voices of fishermen and draw attention to their struggles, including water and land contamination and human rights violations against displaced communities. Could you reflect on the origins of the MPP and share your concerns for the coming years?*

A: One of the movement's greatest concerns is grassroots political education. By focusing on this foundation, we aim to strengthen the movement and empower young people, both men and women. This empowerment enables us to continue denouncing the various forms of violence affecting our territories. Our goal is to address issues at the grassroots level, particularly around gender and youth inclusion.

Q. *Here's a question that may interest Yemaya readers. Female fishermen account for approximately 40–45% of all registered fishermen in Brazil. Yet, policies and legislation, such as Law No. 11.959 on fisheries management, seem to exhibit gender bias. These policies fail to recognize the crucial role of fisherwomen and lack adequate measures to support them or secure their labour rights. Could you pinpoint this gap? What are its main causes, and how does the organization plan to address it?*

A: Fisheries have historically been seen as male-dominated work. Even though there is legislation on small-scale fisheries, women are not adequately represented. Rights remain limited, and in some regions—particularly northeastern Brazil—women are the primary producers of fish. They sustain their households, children, and themselves through fishing activities.

Despite the existence of fisheries laws, these laws need to be improved to reflect the realities and contributions of fisherwomen. Public authorities often fail to recognize this. For instance, when a fisherwoman applies for support from government agencies, like social welfare offices, or seeks benefits such as maternity, sickness, or retirement aid, her credibility is often questioned based on appearance. If she appears well-groomed, civil servants may doubt her status as a fisherwoman. This prejudice effectively criminalizes fisherwomen, as if they must conform to a stereotypical image to validate their profession.

We in the fishermen's movement have consistently denounced this form of discrimination and prejudice within public institutions. Addressing this issue remains a critical challenge in Brazil.

With the return of a progressive government, the Ministry of Fisheries has been reinstated. The ministry is now collaborating with others, such as the Ministry of Health and the General Secretariat of the Presidency, to create protection mechanisms for fisherwomen. These include measures to enhance safety and well-being at work. For example, work protection kits are being planned, which include sunscreen to address the intensifying heat caused by climate change.

Fishing, whether in mangroves, coastal areas, or continental waters, comes with shared challenges, and these efforts aim to address them. The artisanal fishermen's movement is closely monitoring these developments and pushing for these plans to move from paper to practice.

Q: *Is the fishing situation in rural areas different from that in urban areas? Are there differences between freshwater fishing and sea fishing?*

A: Challenges exist everywhere—whether in continental areas, rural regions, or urban centres. Fishermen and fisherwomen alike face these difficulties, regardless of where they live or work.

Q: *There's been much news about violence against women and girls in fishing communities in Brazil. The Maria da Penha Law (Law No. 11,340 of August 7, 2006) was established to combat domestic and family violence against women, addressing five types: physical, psychological, moral, sexual, and patriarchal. Despite this law, has violence against women and girls increased? Is the situation worse in coastal communities compared to rural or urban areas? Has the MPP partnered with other organizations to help victims and survivors of violence in fishing communities?*

A: The Maria da Penha Law has been instrumental in combating various forms of violence against women in Brazil. However, violence has continued to escalate, becoming more frequent and extreme. We're not just witnessing psychological, physical, or verbal abuse anymore—there's also been an alarming rise in femicide, the most brutal form of male violence against women.

For example, a fisherwoman from Rio Grande do Sul was recently murdered by her partner, who couldn't accept the end of their relationship. The violence was horrific and deeply saddening.

The MPP, as a member of Via Campesina, collaborates with organizations like Via Campesina Brazil to run the *Enough Violence Against Women* campaign. This initiative raises awareness and denounces such violence. While the Maria da Penha Law helps prosecute offenders, it cannot prevent cases where women lose their lives to partners unwilling to accept a breakup.

Violence isn't confined to urban areas—it also affects rural regions, including rural workers and fisherwomen. Both urban and rural communities grapple with these challenges.

Q: *Did the fisherwoman who was murdered belong to the Movement? Did you know her personally?*

A: I didn't know her personally, but she was a militant in the Rio Grande do Sul movement. Members of our national leadership were familiar with her as she was active in the fishermen and fisherwomen's community in Rio Grande do Sul. She was a dedicated activist in the movement.

Q: *Assessing, reviewing, and synthesizing information on global fisheries is essential for developing better public policies. But can such issues truly be addressed without policies that promote gender equality, recognize women's roles in care and domestic work, and guarantee their participation in decision-making processes with access to social, economic, and natural resources? Are women still invisible in the system due to a lack of disaggregated data, even though some studies show they've been consistently involved in fishing activities? What is the current situation in Brazil, particularly on the ground?*

A: Your question highlights what we already know. Without representation, without gender guarantees, we can't have public policies that benefit everyone. Effective public policy depends on participation and gender inclusion.

Q: *Based on your extensive experience, what recommendations would you make to improve these aspects?*

A: From my experience as an activist, improving access to public policies requires ensuring participation. Gender representation is critical. Men, women, children, youth, and

LGBT+ individuals must all have a seat at the decision-making table.

We cannot continue to be the ones informed *after* decisions are made. We must be active collaborators—those who build, plan, and make decisions together. We, the grassroots, understand the realities of our territories better than anyone.

When public policies are created and implemented with the active participation of grassroots movements and a broad understanding of local realities, they are more equitable and respectful. This participatory approach is the key to meaningful and inclusive change.

Q: *Law No. 11,959 on Sustainable Development Policy for Fisheries and Aquaculture mentions repairing fishing gear and post-harvest activities but doesn't address gender issues. It overlooks the role of women as mothers, workers, and fisherwomen. It fails to respect fisherwomen's identities, ensure their participation in decision-*

making, or provide specialized healthcare programs for fisherwomen and shellfish gatherers. It also doesn't strengthen collectives of women in traditional communities. How does the MPP address these gaps, both within the movement and in discussions with the government?

A: The law is undeniably sexist and exclusionary, failing to represent women

in fisheries. However, there is currently a discussion underway about a new fisheries law in Brazil. Various fishermen's organizations are mobilizing to propose a new model that positions women as central figures—acknowledging them as food producers, fisherwomen, and workers in multiple roles across the fisheries sector. This includes not only shellfish gathering but also fishing, processing, storage, and commercialization.

In our advocacy efforts, we consistently highlight the leadership role of women in artisanal fisheries and emphasize the need to recognize their vital contributions.

Within the MPP, we prioritize gender inclusion. Each state-level coordination team includes a man, a woman, and a young person. This structure extends to our national leadership, ensuring balanced representation. Why? Because we believe that young people, men, and especially women all have critical roles in shaping fisheries policy. Women's



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National campaign seminar for fishing territories, Brazil. We continue to fight for the recognition of fishing, Quilombola, and Indigenous territories, as well as settlement areas for family farming

participation is essential for creating fair and inclusive policies.

Q: Looking back from 2009, how would you assess the MPP's journey, from the 2012 National Campaign for Fishing Territory to its mobilizations today?

A: The MPP was founded in 2010 with the goal of defending national fishing territories. In July 2012, we launched the popular initiative bill *PL 131/2020* during a major action in Brasília, where 2,000 fishermen gathered to kick off the national campaign to protect traditional fishing grounds. Today, this bill is under discussion in Congress.

We hope it will be approved, as it would provide legal recognition and security for traditional fishing territories. This bill is a vital tool in our fight against large-scale industrial projects, such as dams, mining, and agro-hydro-mining ventures, which threaten these areas.

Currently, MPP articulation is visible in 18 states across Brazil, though the level of organization varies. Our focus remains on strengthening the movement and securing legal protections for these territories.

Q: The SSF Guidelines, which you contributed to before 2014, address various fronts—including hydroelectric projects in Minas Gerais that have harmed rivers, fish habitats, and caused environmental disasters. These Guidelines also propose structuring a comprehensive fisheries policy that accounts for the diversity and socio-environmental roles of fishing communities. How has the National Campaign for the Regularization of Traditional Fishing Territories progressed?

A: The Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) Guidelines are a crucial tool for defending fishing territories. However, their impact is limited because many fishermen, especially in rural areas, are unaware of their existence. Initially, the Guidelines were only available in English or Spanish, making them inaccessible to most Brazilian communities. It was only after the MPP pushed for a Portuguese translation that they became somewhat more accessible.

Even now, these materials are overly technical and lack simple, illustrated language that fishermen and fisherwomen can easily understand. This is a major barrier to their implementation.

The MPP has raised these concerns with the FAO in various meetings, urging improvements to make the Guidelines more practical and accessible. For the SSF Guidelines to have real impact, they need to be linked to Brazil's Convention 169 and Decree 6040. These frameworks guarantee the right of traditional communities to free, prior, and informed consultation before any projects are implemented in their territories.

Currently, companies often manipulate consultations by speaking to only one person in a community, sometimes someone they've co-opted. This practice ignores the collective voice and leads to territories being sold or exploited without true community consent.

Q: Since 2022, has the situation on the ground changed? Has the government made progress in recognizing, demarcating, and providing titles for fishing territories to guarantee the security and rights of fishing communities?

A: Unfortunately, not much has changed. The popular initiative bill is still under discussion in Congress, and even under President Lula's progressive government, there has been little progress in demarcating territories.

We continue to fight for the recognition of fishing, Quilombola, and Indigenous territories, as well as settlement areas for family farming. However, the lack of action has left many communities vulnerable.

In particular, small-scale fishing territories are increasingly being exploited for shrimp farming and tilapia aquaculture. These industries have caused widespread environmental damage and undermined artisanal fishing practices. This exploitation violates the principles of artisanal fisheries and threatens the livelihoods of traditional fishing communities.

Q: What mechanisms, forums, and channels does the movement use to maintain dialogue with social movements and address their demands,

ensuring the rights and needs of artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen are heard? Are you able to participate in the Permanent Fisheries Management Committees (CPG), and what are the criteria for participation?

A: We are represented in international spaces such as *Via Campesina* and the *World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP)*, where we bring forward our demands. We have also engaged with the FAO on numerous occasions. In Brazil, we are part of the National Fisheries Council (CONAP), the National Artisanal Fisheries Forum, and the Standing Committee for Small-Scale Fisheries Management (CPG).

However, we face challenges. During the Bolsonaro administration, a decree was issued that weakened civil society's participation in these forums. This decree continues to limit grassroots movements' access to these spaces, prioritizing academia and industrial fisheries, which have financial resources to cover travel and participation costs. Grassroots organizations like ours lack the means to send representatives consistently, creating a barrier to effective participation.

Despite this, we are active in other spaces like the National Fisheries Council and the new social participation forums established by President Lula's government. These platforms allow us to voice our demands and advocate for the needs of artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen.

Q: *What support do fishermen and fisherwomen receive to address challenges such as drought, climate change, and declining fish stocks?*

A: Climate change has severely impacted Brazil, particularly in the southern region, which experiences flooding, and the northern region, which suffers from droughts.

In the south, government assistance has been minimal, leaving many fishing families in dire situations. In the north, several Amazonian municipalities declared a state of public calamity last year. Artisanal fishermen who had an active registration (RGP) and received unemployment benefits in the prior year were granted two minimum wages in a single payment.

This year, with worsening conditions and more states declaring emergencies, the government has issued a decree allowing affected fishermen in the north to receive two payments, each equivalent to one minimum wage.

However, accessing essential resources like food and water remains a significant challenge, especially in isolated communities. Many families lack even basic necessities like drinking water, and some cannot even access water for

bathing. In my community, the tributary that once sustained us has dried up completely. We are directly experiencing the devastating effects of climate change.

Q: *Brazil has a constitutional obligation to preserve cultural heritage and owes a debt to its fishing communities. Articles 215 and 216 of the Constitution guarantee cultural rights and emphasize the protection of traditional practices, beliefs, and livelihoods. What progress have fishworkers' organizations made in this regard?*

A: While the Constitution explicitly guarantees these rights, they are rarely upheld in practice. This gap drives our fight to ensure the provisions on paper are realized in our communities. The *Popular Initiative Bill 131/2020* is a key part of this effort, as it aims to secure fishing territories and protect the cultural and material heritage of artisanal fishing communities.

Culture, tradition, beliefs, and ways of life are invaluable. We want to preserve the religiosity, customs, and freedoms of traditional peoples, ensuring their territories are legally recognized and respected. This includes Indigenous territories, Afro-descendant communities, and traditional fishing grounds.

Our goal is for these laws to move beyond bureaucratic delays and be implemented effectively. Communities should not be displaced—whether by water scarcity, flooding, or the encroachment of industrial ventures like agro-hydro-mineral businesses. People must have the freedom to remain in their territories, living according to their culture and choices.

We have also fought for *TAUs* (Terms of Authorization for Use of Territories) through the SPU (Brazilian Heritage Management Secretariat). Through lobbying efforts in Brasília, we've made progress in securing these authorizations, which allow families to stay on their lands while working toward full territorial regularization.

Q: *Congratulations on your leadership within the MPP. Would you like to leave a message for those working on gender and fisheries issues worldwide?*

A: My message to small-scale fishing communities worldwide is this: we cannot fight alone. Gender parity must be ensured in all spaces—decision-making, planning, and action. Without gender inclusivity, progress will remain limited.

Our struggles are strengthened by unity and collective vision. Together, we must fight for the common good, always keeping in mind the well-being of all. Whether on rivers or at sea, we will stand firm in our fight for justice and equity. 🌊