

International Journal of Human Sciences Research

WOMEN AND THE SEA IN SANTA CATARINA, SOUTHERN BRAZIL

Rose Mary Gerber

Social Anthropology, Epagri

Agricultural research and rural extension
company, Santa Catarina, Brazil

All content in this magazine is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License. Attribution-Non-Commercial-Non-Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



Abstract: This article comes from my research with fisherwomen who work in artisanal fishing in Santa Catarina, Southern Brazil, which resulted in my doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology at UFSC (Federal University of Santa Catarina) in 2013. Since then I've been observing how these women recognize themselves, are recognized, and seek recognition of their rights. There are many ways for women to work in fishing, whether at sea or ashore, although I have focused on those who work embarked. To say that these women work embarked means that they work on small boats, going to sea and returning to land every day for periods ranging from three to 16 hours, depending on the type of fishing that they do.

Keywords: artisanal fishing; fisherwomen; rights; recognition.

FISHERWOMEN

On the basis of what I see in Santa Catarina, I propose some names for the different ways in which women work in artisanal fishing, with the aim of helping to recognize these professionals. I consider three central ways of being a fisherwoman, which I have named:

- a) those that work on embarked daily;
- b) the *stand by*;
- c) those that gather at the water's edge; and
- d) those that work on land.

With regard to those embarked, are those who work on boats in rivers, lagoons and the sea, fishing for various fish, shrimp, crab or specific fishes. *Stand by*s are those who don't go to sea every day, but are ready when necessary. For example, when the guy who works with her husband misses work. About those who gather at the water's edge, I found those who deal with cockles. Those who work on land are part of the process that makes fishing work, such as marketing, cleaning, processing,

including shrimp peeling, fish filleting, mussel de-shelling, crab meat extraction, to name a few examples.

When it is questioned which women work in fisheries, purposely in the plural, it is interesting to ask ourselves if women don't work in fisheries or if we are the ones who don't see them when we do our research. This is because there are many of them, or a large proportion, who work in a very subtle way, often in the back of their homes and in difficult, almost invisible situations. These are women who fish in tiny boats, with few tools and in precarious conditions.

Another question that needs to be considered refers to what has been called materiality. Maluf (2009) points out that the materiality of gender is not biological sex, but the effects of difference (social, symbolic and political) on women's bodies, lives and daily and historical experiences. I agree with her when she says that "different women imply different materialities that need to be approached, understood and considered" (MALUF, 2009, p.14). Fisherwomen present several ways in which this materiality emerges under the effects of difference in their bodies, their life trajectories and daily experiences, which should also constitute the necessary evidence, according to the postulates of the National Social Security Institute (INSS), for their professional recognition, which is not always the case.

A majority of the women I interacted with had started fishing at a very early age with their parents, between the ages of 8, 9 and 10. Women whose careers are marked by economic hardship and poverty. Girls who left school because they had to work. They were usually the eldest daughters and were called without being asked if they wanted to work in the fishery. They were needed. And they went. Others imposed themselves on fishing, even though their parents didn't want them

to go out to sea. The curiosity to know what it was like to fish instigated them from an early age. Others had their husbands as their masters. Some were themselves the masters of their companions. They told me that they got accustomed to the activity, or that that's all they know how to do. In common, the laugh, good humor and jocosity, coupled with the use of expressions such as *liking, loving, having a passion for, addiction* to life at/of the sea.

A FIELD THAT IS SEA

With regard to my field, which is the sea, I quickly realized that I would have to deal with much more than the land/sea/beach relationship. I would have to pay attention to the different times and rhythms. *Better weather; good weather; bad weather; change of weather* were expressions that referred not exactly to questions of climate, temperature, but in the sense of *best weather* for fishing, usually combined with warmth, but which for some fish, such as mullet, is the exact opposite: the colder, better, or bad weather, defined as *bad weather*, which always meant waiting for the weather to improve. The busy seasons, with the daily movement due to good weather, therefore filled my research with different rhythms.

Ingold and Kurttila (2000, p. 187-192), when discussing questions related to traditional knowledge as stemming from local practices, cite the Sami people of Northern Finland, who use the expression *weather* as opposed to the scientists' expression *climate*. Climate, which is registered by scientists, refers to variables that are measured, such as temperature, precipitation and atmospheric pressure. Weather refers to heat or cold, harvest time or storms. Instead of climate, which is registered by scientists, weather is experienced by the group as the environment obeying the cycle of the seasons. The authors postulate that this is not a matter of cultural

prescriptions, but of knowledge that comes from practice, from life experiences and from movement in that environment. I agree with the authors that this learning takes place in practice, in intra or intergenerational relationships. Therefore, it's not about cultural prescriptions, but about experimentation in specific contexts.

What Ingold and Kurttila refer to as the different periods that compose an experience, Bachelard (1994) calls "ritmanalysis", according to which life is undulation. "The fruit calendar is the calendar of ritmanalysis. Rhythmanalysis seeks occasions for rhythms everywhere" (BACHELARD, 1994, p. 133). Ingold and Kurttila (2000) speak of harvest seasons. Bachelard (1994) speaks of seasons in a calendar. In my field, what I saw was a cycle composed of different seasons in an annual calendar of fish, shrimp, crab; calms or storms; abundance or scarcity. A "ritmanalysis" that concerned life in which the cycle of the seasons guided not only the times of going to sea or waiting, but the very experience of those who lived through these times.

THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING RECOGNIZED AS A FISHERWOMAN

Equality «is not the absence or elimination of difference, but rather the recognition of difference and the decision to ignore it or take it into consideration» (SCOTT, 2005, p.15). Because it is seen as being done by men, it is not seen as possible for women to have an individual experience in fishing, which concerns not just a professional experience, but a social one; their way of being and existing in the world. When they ignore or disregard this unique possibility of existence, or don't recognize it as possible, technicians working in different institutions «remove the sense of experimentation and collective creation from life. They remove from the act of living

the full character of political struggle and the affirmation of singular ways of existing» (BAPTISTA, 1999, p.49).

The reference that the world of fishing is eminently masculine is based on a hierarchical view that does not recognize its existence, and therefore invisibilizes fisherwomen, whose trajectory in the search for rights and recognition is still incipient.

It is necessary to show the differences in order to achieve equal rights if we consider that “the work of fishing is little considered by the public power and by academia itself, which certainly causes this sector to be forgotten in relation to other activities carried out by this traditional population” (MACHADO, 2007).

Although Article 5(I) of the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 states that “men and women are equal in rights and obligations”, in practice obligations and rights don't meet with the equality that is so widely proclaimed. When I asked one of the INSS (National Social Security Institute) technicians about the possibility of a woman, for example, not being married, what would it be like? He replied: «But she has to be, she has to have some connection, either she's a daughter, or she's a fisherman's wife. She's not on her own. She's his function. So she has to prove that she's a wife, daughter, etc.» Here it seems plausible to me to dialog with Rosaldo (1995:22), when he states that «gender, in all human groups, must be understood in political and social terms with reference not to biological limitations, but to local and specific forms of social relations and particularly of social inequality.» And one of the forms of social inequality is usually the double (in) visibility and recognition.

If we consider visibility as the knowledge that communities have about the women who work in fisheries (SEMPERE E SOUSA, 2008, p. 74), we can say that it oscillates between the more expansive visibility that women

who go on board enjoy in view of the gender bias that has traditionally led this activity to be done by men. They would therefore have a prestige that those who work on land do not have. However, it is still very difficult to officially recognize women as fisherwomen, more in relation to their status as married to a fisherman than as the professionals they actually are. It is undeniable that progress has been made in terms of guaranteeing the registration of women in fishing colonies and fishing syndicates, since then they have been able to access the right to unemployment insurance and retirement. But there is still a lot to be done to recognize them as professionals, regardless of whether they are the daughters or wives of fishermen.

In the experiences of fisherwomen, I found examples alluding to the unpreparedness of some INSS technicians who, imbued with the power to represent the state, exercise surveillance and punishment (FOUCAULT, 1999[1975]), not recognizing them as subjects. Their actions were related to the gender hierarchy, to a stigmatized view (GOFFMAN, 1993) of these women who they assumed were unable to exist: fisherwomen. Impasses, difficulties, which they referred to as situations of *humiliation* they went through when some technicians thought it was impossible for a woman to work in fishing and therefore be entitled to a retirement pension as a fisherwoman.

Wolf (2003) considers power to be an aspect of relations between people, and states that, “when dealing with group relations in a complex society, we must not forget to emphasize the fact that the exercise of power by some people over others enters into all of them, at all levels of integration” (WOLF, 2003, p.75). Both the one who is imbued with power and the one who suffers the action exist impregnated by power. Technicians who act on behalf of an institution, and fisherwomen

who react to this action. In other words, they recognize in the power that is exercised in the name of the state, the very constitution of state power.

Since the system, as informed by one of the INSS technicians, holds the power to decide who does or does not conform to the prerogatives defined therein, it leaves no doubt, given that it was created to define the fate of a person's retirement. *It is transparent*. There is no room for doubt, claimed the Institute's representatives. However, and ironically, since it is transparent, it does not allow visibility for those who do not fit in: fisherwomen. How can evidence be constituted if the recognition of this individual, a fisherwoman, does not exist on its own? If public bodies see the work of these women as non-existent. How long will they remain invisible, diluted in the *autonomous* or housewife category? Is there not more to these women than a becoming fisherwomen?

IN (A)SUBJECTIONS, THE SUBJECT IS A FISHERWOMAN

Among all the fishnets, one of the most perverse, given that nothing escapes from it, is the sorcerer's net. In the conical shape of a funnel, it carries away everything in its depths. What goes in cannot come out. Nothing escapes from it. On the one hand, I was inspired by this net, which catches everything it can. On the other hand, I align myself with the presuppositions of Foucault (2009), according to whom surveillance is a defining function of regulatory and control processes, «an internal part of the production machinery and a specific gear of disciplinary power» (FOUCAULT, 2009, p. 169).

Allied to these, I am referring to the constant (a)subjections to which these fisherwomen are subjected, which exist in relation to what Maluf (2009) discussed as being «modes and regimes of subjectivation

in the contemporary world». Such modes of subjectivation are related to the trajectories of fisherwomen in the search for their conquests as professionals, with repercussions on the process and difficulties of retirement, where the central question of the anonymity and invisibility of women in the fishing sector emerges in the face of the defined INSS criterion of Specially Insured; postures and visions of public organizations and people who, in general, are unaware of their existence and are suspicious about their capacity to live a “subjective experience” (MALUF, 2009, p. 13).

Fraser has already pointed out that there is a need to seek an equilibrium that allies the questions of recognition, redistribution and representation, and that situations must be analyzed within the context in which they are inserted.

In cases where non-recognition involves the denial of the common humanity of some participants, the remedy is universalist recognition; thus, the first and most fundamental compensation for South African apartheid was «non-racialized» universal citizenship. On the contrary, when non-recognition involves the denial of what is distinctive of certain participants, the remedy can be the recognition of specificity (FRASER, 2001, p. 120).

The author argues that it is possible to bring together ethics and justice, justice and the good life, the perspective of both Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, Fraser recalls. For her, there is a central question that needs to be looked at from the front, quickly and free of unnecessary dichotomies.

If we fail to formulate this question, if we hold on, instead, at false antitheses and misleading dichotomies, we will lose the chance to foresee social arrangements that can compensate for economic and cultural injustices. Only by looking at integrative approaches that unite redistribution and recognition can we achieve the demands of

justice for all (FRASER, 2001, p.137).

If Fraser's (2001; 2007) arguments are worth thinking about, I would say that when non-recognition involves the denial of the common humanity of fisherwomen, universalist recognition can be triggered,

made visible in a generalized expression as *rural women*. However, when non-recognition involves the denial of what is distinctive about them - to be a fisherwoman - my proposal corroborates Fraser (2001): let's recognize specificity.

REFERENCES

BACHELARD, Gaston. *A dialética da duração*. 2ª ed. São Paulo: Ática, 1994.

BAPTISTA, Luis Antônio. A atriz, o padre e a psicanalista – os amoladores de faca. In: *A cidade dos sábios*. Rio de Janeiro: Summus Editorial, 1999.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Vigiar e punir*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2009 [1975].

FRASER, Nancy. Da redistribuição ao reconhecimento? Dilemas da justiça na era pós-socialista. In: SOUZA, J. (org.) *Democracia hoje: novos desafios para a teoria democrática contemporânea*. Brasília: Editora UNB, 2001.

_____. Mapeando a imaginação feminista: da redistribuição ao reconhecimento e a representação. In: *Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis 15 (2): 291-308, maio/ago 2007.

GERBER, Rose M. *Mulheres e o Mar*. Florianópolis: Ed da UFSC, 2021. E-book-pdf.

GOFFMAN, Erving. *Estigma: la identidad deteriorada*. 1993. 5. Ed. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu Editores.

INGOLD, Tim & KURTILA, Terhi. The perception of the environment in Finnish Lapland. *Body & society*. London and New York: Routledge: Sage Publications, 2000; 6; 183.

MACHADO, Denise. Catadoras de caranguejo e saberes tradicionais na conservação de manguezais da Amazônia brasileira. In: *Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, 15(2): 485-490, maio-agosto/2007.

MALUF, Sônia Weidner. *Por uma antropologia do sujeito: esboços*. Florianópolis, 2009.

ROSALDO, Michele. *O uso e o abuso da antropologia: reflexões sobre o feminismo e o entendimento inter-cultural*. Porto Alegre: Horizontes Antropológicos/PPGAS/UFRGS. Ano 1, nº.1, 1995.

SCOTT, Joan. O enigma da igualdade. *Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, 13 (1): 11-30, janeiro-abril/2005.

SEMPERE, Maria Josep e SOUSA, Rogéria (coord.). *Estamos cá. Existimos. As mulheres na Pesca nos Açores*. Açores: UMAR Açores, 2008.

WOLF, E. R. Encarando o poder: velhos insights, novas questões. In: *Antropologia e poder: contribuições de Eric Wolf*. Bela Feldman-Bianco & Gustavo L. Ribeiro (org.). Brasília: Ed. da UnB, 2003.