Do women fish?

Case studies from India highlight the vital but little-recognised role that women play as fishers

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It is now acknowledged that women account for 50 per cent of the workforce in fisheries and aquaculture, especially when we take into account their work in post-harvest activities like processing and trading. The findings of the 'Illuminating Hidden Harvests' report show that, globally, about one in four workers in small-scale fisheries are women. However, women, especially in developing countries, face substantive challenges to engaging in and benefitting equitably from these sectors. Several studies have pointed out that they have poor access to and control of resources. Also, in India, women are losing out on the traditional access rights they had on landed fish due to factors like mechanisation of fishing vessels. Further, deep-seated patriarchal, cultural and social norms limit their engagement. Most of women's work is in the form of unpaid family labour, which is seen as an extension of household reproductive roles. Incomes they earn for similar work are lower as compared to men, for example, in seafood processing or in fish vending. In dry fish processing and trade, a transition from processors/traders, to low paid and sometimes unpaid labour, is being observed. The one node in fish value chains that engages women and yet is hardly acknowledged, however, is fish harvesting. In India, about 49 per cent of the 2.5 million adult population in marine fishing communities in India, are women. Of the adult population in these communities, 81 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are reported to be employed in the sector. There are no reports of women in fish harvesting, although 58 per cent of all seed collectors are women

PRIYANKA AJAY NAKHAWA / ICAR-CIFT and ICAR-CIFE

Women gillnet fishers, Raigad, Maharashtra, India. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also do fishing

and a massive 74 per cent of all allied workers too, which includes work like net making and mending, marketing, curing and processing, peeling, labour, other jobs.

If we were to formally record all the jobs that women carry out in fisheries their profiles would be highly varied. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also dry excess catch or the catch that is specifically meant for drying, they smoke and ferment fish, collect seaweed and work in small-scale pre-processing and commercial processing. They also do fishing. These myriad activities are however, not captured comprehensively.

Besides all this, women bear almost all the burden of household work. A 2019 survey in India found that women (including fisherwomen) spent on average five hours and fifteen minutes in a day doing domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing. And one third of the women, mostly those with young children, spend on average another two hours and seventeen minutes every day caring for and instructing children: seven and a half hours in all. And interestingly, for women who have received higher education, the burden of such work is not significantly different than for other women.

There are no data or official records of women doing fishing. Their fishing activities are often termed 'subsistence', which, by definition, is something that is done for maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimal level. Our studies over the past few years, however, show that women do not always only carry out subsistence fishing. Their activities ensure nutritional security as well as additional incomes, and the women themselves consider fishing as their distinct livelihood activity.

In our studies we have documented several cases where women are engaged in reservoir based fish harvest. Reservoirs are large inland water resources that can help increase fish production. Since the main function of reservoirs is usually power generation or irrigation, reservoir based fishing is generally considered a spin-off, secondary activity. Reservoirs are stocked with fish by the Department of Fisheries of the respective states, and fishing rights are leased either to individuals or cooperative societies. Coracle fishing or fishing using small canoes with gear such as gillnets is commonly seen. Generally, fishing is carried out by husband-wife teams and up to 80 per cent of household income comes from this activity. Since equal effort is expended, half of this income is the direct contribution of the women.

Lakes and rivers are important inland water bodies too. In Wular Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, women carry out fishing of snow trouts and common carps, and harvest water chestnut locally called trapa for their livelihoods. The fish is either sold fresh or processed and is in high demand especially during winters. In Loktak Lake in the north-eastern part of India, women use small canoes for fishing using dip nets, scoop nets and traps fabricated using locally available bamboo. The fish is marketed locally.

As in the case of lakes and rivers, fishing in India's coastal backwaters and estuaries has also been documented. In the southern state of Kerala, husband-wife teams carry out fishing using gillnets in the Vembanad backwaters. The marketing is undertaken by the husband, but the wife is an equal partner in all other tasks.

In Raigad, Maharashtra, women along with men engage in single-day gillnet fishing in estuaries, fishing at depths of between three to five fathoms (about 5.5 to 9 metres) and harvest ribbon fish, shrimps, mullets, croakers, and golden anchovy. Women are solely responsible for marketing either in their villages or in faraway markets, depending on the volume of catches.

Bheels are unique to the north-eastern part of the country. These are flood plain wetlands, low-lying areas bordering large rivers, which are seasonally inundated by the overspill from the main river. Women in large numbers engage in fishing using unique dip nets, sometimes reaching the shallow fishing grounds in canoes. These bheels are dominated by nutrient-rich small fishes, ensuring the nutritional security of the households of these women. These fish are an important constituent of the diet of the people in the region and are rich in nutrients.

The pokkali fields are part of the wetland ecosystem typical in Kerala. These are lands where the alternate 'rice-fish system' has been traditionally practised. The fish/shrimp culture that takes place alternately with rice production utilises a natural filtration process. Of late farmers have also been stocking these farms. These lands are open to whoever wishes to fish on it once one crop is harvested and before the second is taken up. Generally women (and very few men) glean or fish and shrimp from these fields. They use small indigenous scoop nets for harvesting, following the lunar cycle to decide on when to fish (fishing close to the full moon and new moon days). Daily fishing can extend up to six hours, in neck deep water. Feeder canals to these lands are also potential sources of fish, where the women carry out the activity when the lands, during the cropping season, are declared out of bounds. The fish is used for household consumption, with the excess being marketed fresh.

Women working in groups also use indigenous gear like coconut leaves for fishing in these areas, collecting the fish by dragging the fronds in the water and handpicking the fish. Again in the northeastern parts of the country,

Women are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work

we see dip nets being used on the margins of paddy fields for fishing. Women in groups also travel to a neighbouring district and fish in paddy fields, ditches and other waterlogged areas. They go out in groups, fish for about five hours, and then proceed to the market to sell the catch. Groups comprising young and older women from local fisher communities in Raigad, Maharashtra, glean oysters, gastropods and crabs from inshore waters and creeks, using curved blades on a wooden handle. Women from Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu in South India, for decades have dived into the waters to harvest seaweed. Seaweed farming is in fact extensively carried out by women.

These are just some examples from among several thousands of women, engaged in fishing in India but who are not licenced fishers. Women are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work. Women's work makes significant contributions to household incomes and nutritional security. Women are also a major workforce in fish harvesting across the country. Prevailing estimates of 33 per cent of women being part of the workforce therefore need realistic revision. The impact of different stressors is different on men and women; this needs to be recognised too. Gender should be central to policy development and all women in the sector should be recognised as fishworkers. A comprehensive census to generate on-the-ground factual information on women and their contributions must be taken up.

Left in the lurch

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic and nationwide lockdown, fisherwomen in Maharashtra, India, have few fallback options

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The Guhagar fishing village lies in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra state in India. It has about 450 fisher families. Earlier, the regular routine for the fisherwomen of the village centred around visiting the beach and fish landing sites early in the morning to gather and buy fish that they would later sell.

Since 25 March this year, India has been under an unprecedented nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19, the novel coronavirus disease. This has severely impacted all economic activity in the country. For fishworkers along the fish value chain this has meant a total stoppage of all work, and loss of income. "Because of COVID-19, for almost a month, all fishing activities have stopped and fishers have no income. Traditional fishers are like daily wage workers who go to the sea daily to catch fish and earn their livelihood," said Ujwala Jaykisan Patil, a Mumbai based fisherwoman leader of the Maharashtra Machhimar Kruti Samiti.

While the government announced a Rs 1.70 lakh crore (USD 22.46) relief package for the poor to help them fight the battle against COVID-19, many, including members of the fishing community of Guhagar, find themselves excluded. According to Deepti Dattatreya Asgolkar, a fisherwoman from Guhagar, "Almost 80-85 per cent fisherwomen and their families in the village do not fall under the BPL (Below Poverty Line) category, and hence, are not eligible for subsidised PDS (Public Distribution System) foodgrains by the government. Also, with no fishing and no source of income during lockdown, who has the money to use cooking gas which costs over Rs 800 a cylinder? So, we go daily to the local forest to get firewood to cook food."

Before the lockdown, the average day for fisherwomen in Guhagar usually started with their leaving home at 3 am to reach the fish landing sites and beaches where fishermen brought the fish catch. There they helped sort out the catch, bought and then proceeded to sell it in local fish markets. Some would go on foot from one residential colony to another, selling fish. Many fisherwomen spent at least ten to twelve hours a day in fish vending and fishing allied activities. All these activities have now come to a standstill. The fisherwomen are now engaged in cooking food not only for their families but also for migrant fish workers stranded in their village.

This plight is not restricted to Guhagar village. The story repeats itself across fishing villages in Maharashtra and in fact all of India. "For the last one month, I am sitting idle at home. Fishermen are not going to the sea to catch fish, and I have no fish to sell. Earlier I used to earn from Rs 200 (USD 3) to sometimes Rs 500 (USD 7) a day selling fish. Now my income is zero. I have received no free rations from the government. If we try and step out, the police catch us because of the curfew," said Tejaswini Kolabakar, a fisherwoman from the Thane district of Maharashtra. Another fisherwoman from Palghar in north Maharashtra, Rekha Gangadhar Tare, added, "Before this coronavirus disease, we fisherwomen used to earn Rs 100-150 (USD 2) a day selling fish. Now our income has dropped drastically. We are somehow just going to local water bodies to catch some fish and feed our stomachs. If we are lucky, we are able to sell fish for Rs 40-50 (USD 0.75) a day."

The National Fishworkers' Forum has demanded that the central government announce an economic package specifically for the fishing community to combat disruption caused by the lockdown, and keeping in mind that the upcoming monsoon ban season will further affect the livelihoods of crores of fishworkers and allied workers.

It has demanded a monthly allowance of Rs 15,000 (USD 200) per fisher family for a three-month period to be paid in advance, and an adequate supply of ration with cooking fuel to the fishworkers.

Meanwhile, in its letter dated 30 March, the Central Department of Fisheries indicated it was proposing financial assistance to those fishers who had bank accounts linked to the government's Unique Identification scheme – Aadhaar. But, so far, no financial help has come.

Even if the government does announce a relief package for fishers, fisherwomen are unsure if they will be covered. "Most of the government schemes and compensation packages are meant for fishers registered with fishing cooperatives. A large number of women involved in fish vending activities are not registered. But they must also be compensated, as they are completely dependent on fishing activities to earn a livelihood," said Ujwala Patil. "Half of the month of March and all of April has been spent in lockdown, which is on till

SHIVAKUMAR MAGADA

A dip in livelihood of women fishvendors in Karnataka, India. Most of the government schemes and compensation packages are meant for fishers registered with fishing cooperatives. A large number of women involved in fish vending activities are not registered.

31 May. From 1 June, a seasonal fishing ban will come into force in the west coast for 61 days. Imagine living without any source of income for three months," said Tejaswini Kolabakar. "We must be provided at least Rs 2,500-3,000 (USD 35-40) per month for the next three months to tide over the impact of the coronavirus outbreak," said Deepti Asgolkar.

On 10 April, two weeks after the nationwide lockdown came into force, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued an amendment to the lockdown rules which exempted "operations of the Fishing Marine/Aquaculture industry, including feeding and maintenance, harvesting, processing, packaging, cold chain, sale and marketing; hatcheries, feed plants, commercial aquaria, movement of fish/shrimp and fish products, fish seed/feed and workers for all these activities". The amendment made social distancing and proper hygiene practices in these activities mandatory. However the notice did not help the fishing communities in any substantial way. According to Ujwala Patil "Because of the coronavirus disease, fishers are scared. Fishing villages are densely populated areas. They also accommodate migrant fishworkers. Fish markets are crowded, too. Fisherwomen are too scared to venture out".

The National Fishworkers' Forum while welcoming the revised guidelines, has asked the government to announce clear directions and advisories from the State Fisheries Department in the public domain and respective websites, as there is a combination of confusion and fear among the fishing communities, which is stalling the resumption of fishing activities. It has also demanded "definite orders with respect to auctioning and sale of fish in the harbours while maintaining social distancing".

Deepti Asgolkar, asked, "The government may have said fishing activities are exempted, but there is curfew in place, too. Most fisherwomen go walking to the fish market to sell fish. Amid curfew, how do they do that?"

The lockdown has also affected over 100,000 migrant fishworkers stranded in their boats off the Maharashtra coast. These migrant fish workers, mostly from far off states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, are stranded as all transport is shut and there is no way for them to return to their home states. "In spite of approaching various authorities and writing letters to the district collectors, no help has come from the government for these stranded fishers across the Maharashtra's coast. Since the lockdown, we are supplying them dry rations and drinking water in their boats," said Kiran Koli of Maharashtra Machhimar Kriti Samiti. Meanwhile, fisherwomen are trying their level best to feed the migrant fishworkers. "There is something about the fishing community that even during a crisis, no one goes hungry. Whatever food is there, is shared between all. While we cook for our families, we also provide food to the stranded fishworkers," said Ujwala Patil.

The other more long term impacts of the pandemic are also becoming evident on the fisherwomen. For instance, Guhagar fishing village in Ratnagiri has 20 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of fisherwomen who save money and use it for various purposes. In the words of Deepti Asgolkar, "All the 20 SHGs in the village are shut, as no one has money to pay the monthly contribution. These are very difficult times and we have received no support from the government".

Because of COVID19, for almost a month, all fishing activities have stopped and fishers have no income.

Organising women

Five groups engaged in organising women in fishing from different parts of India recently got together to share their experiences

Nikita Gopal (nikiajith@gmail.com), Principal Scientist, CIFT-ICAR, India moderated the round table discussion on ***Organizing Women*** at Kochi, India during the brainstorming meeting on Mainstreaming Gender into Fisheries Policies and Legislation. The participants are Jesu Rethinam (jesur1955@gmail.com), Jyoti Rajesh Meher (jyoti.meher26@gmail.com), Ujwala Jaykisan Patil (ujwalajpatil@gmail.com), Seeta Dasan (sewakerala@gmail.com) and Jharna Acharya (jharnaacharyya@gmail.com). The discussion was documented by Manas Roshan (icsf@icsf.net) and transcribed by C. Manjula (manjula.c6@gmail.com), Shilpa Nandy (shilpanandy@yahoo.co.in), A.J. Vijayan (vijayanaj@hotmail.com) and Samyuktha (sam.pc.work@gmail.com)

Nikita Gopal

Recently, five groups working with women in marine and inland fisheries across a number of states in India came together for a round table discussion to share experiences of organising women in the fishing sector. The five were: SNEHA from Tamil Nadu; Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) from West Bengal; Maharashtra Machimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS-Palghar) and Maharashtra Machimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS-Mumbai) from Maharashtra; and Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) from Kerala. The discussion was moderated by Nikita Gopal, Principal Scientist, Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, India. The round table highlighted the common issues of women in fisheries and also showed how effective the organised strength of women can be in terms of gaining rights and benefits. This article summarises the experiences shared during the discussion.

Jesu Rethinam

Responding to questions posed by Nikita Gopal, the moderator, Jesu Rethinam, Director of SNEHA, shared that her organization has been active with fishing communities, focusing on the women, since 1984. Structuring was done at the village level, with units, called *sangam*, federated up to the district level in the Karaikal district of Tamil Nadu. The first major achievement was in getting women to participate in meetings of the traditional fisher community organizations at the village level, called panchayats. Traditionally, only men have been allowed to sit in and be a part of panchayat meetings. The participation of women in sangam activities initially led to tension and even clashes between the panchayats and sangams. Today women find they have a collective voice in decision making in the village.

The second issue for women members of SNEHA, according to Jesu Rethinam, came with the establishment of a harbour in Karaikal, which led to the shifting of traditional fish landing sites to the harbour. Women had to travel greater distances and also compete with other large buyers for fish. The organization of women helped them to at least enforce a first right on purchasing fish from traditional fishers at the harbour. They even went on a collective strike, with around 400 fish vendors refusing to buy any fish till the first right to fish was granted to them. The fish vendors reduced their purchase and transport costs by pooling resources and buying together. The organizational strength also helped the women fishers in Kariakal to get compensation after the tsunami. Women have now taken up the issue of allowing local fish markets to be handed over on lease to cooperatives of women fish vendors.

Despite years of activity in the region with women fishers, the challenge of women's representation remains an issue for SNEHA. The Tamil Nadu Fisheries Welfare Board does not have any women representatives. The demand to include fishworkers in all government benefit schemes still remains to be addressed. Women were included in savings-cum-relief schemes of the state, but only to the extent that there was one representation per family in the fishing community. Issues of fish vendors and street vending have remained a large, unfinished task.

In response to the moderator's questions, Jharna Acharya, an organiser with DMF, said that they had been working with fishers and fishworkers for the last 30 years. One of the demands while organising women was for identity cards and access to government benefits and schemes. The DMF has been successful in securing over 1000 women's identity cards in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas and Purbo Medinipur in West Bengal. Another important issue, according toher, was organising communities for rights under the Forest Rights Act in the mangrove-rich region of the Sundarbans, to protect their traditional fishing rights. The community members were given organizational and legal support to face up to harassment from forest and coastal authorities. The women successfully protested against a ban on collecting firewood, and

Jharna Acharya

attempts to cancel traditional boat licenses. The intervention of the DMF also enabled 'tiger widows', the widows of fishers attacked and killed by tigers in the Sunderbans, to get compensation, including a monthly government pension.

The DMF has formed a union of fish vendors, among around 1000 women fish vendors in the region. The union has taken up issues of lease rights to marketplaces constructed by the government, provision of toilets and water facilities in fish markets, and proper location of the marketplaces. On the union's intervention, the government authorities have provided women with ice boxes to preserve fish.

Working with inland fishers in the Howrah region, the DMF was able to get identity cards and credit cards under schemes earlier restricted to farmers working on land. It was able to campaign for restriction in the use of pesticides in farming, which was adversely affecting fish ponds and rivers in the region, and for the government agencies to provide fish fingerlings and feed for small aquaculture operations. The DMF is also working to get land titles to protect tenure for traditional inland fishers.

The DMF has a membership base of 2000 women fishers in its union. The union has been making demands for extending benefits of state schemes announced for women and the youth to fishing communities. However, when asked by government officials to give a list of potential beneficiaries to be considered, the union finds its membership base too small for it to make demands for all women in fishing communities in West Bengal.

Jyoti Rajesh Meher and Ujwala Jaykishan Patil represented the MMKS from Palghar and Mumbai respectively, in Maharashtra. For the MMKS-Palghar, a major struggle is against the various development projects by big industry that threaten the livelihoods of traditional fishers. These include the continuing fight against the establishment of the proposed Wadhawan port by the Jindal Steel Works, as well as ocean surveys by the public sector Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in some of the most productive fishing belts. The state's Minister for Fisheries had promised compensation to fishers for fishing days lost due to the ONGC surveys, but the calculation of compensation was a big challenge. Fishing along the coast was also impacted by pollution from the Tarapur Industrial Area, and the MMKS was struggling for a ban on effluent disposal into the sea.

Jyoti Rajesh Meher

The MMKS as a trade union was also working with women, to set up women's cooperatives, and take up various issues of their rights. Through continuous struggle, it had managed to get reservation of a few compartments in local trains for women to transport fish in the Palghar-Mumbai belt. Efforts for compensation helped women fish vendors affected by the destruction caused during the Phyan cyclone in 2009, and those impacted by the oil spill from the collision of the two ships, MSC Chitra and Khalija 3, in 2010. The struggle for compensation has been carrying on for nine years, with a final resolution yet to be achieved.

Ujwala Jaykishan Patil

MMKS in Palghar and Mumbai also took up the issue of street fish markets being affected by Mumbai city development plans, in turn impacting women fish vendors. A survey undertaken with the help of ICSF helped the MMKS to identify 102 fish markets in the city and to provide a map of these fish markets to the municipal authorities, with a demand that the fish markets were retained in situ in the new city Master Plan. The lack of facilities to women fish vendors at the Sasoon and Colaba Dock landing sites was also taken up with the city administration.

The union is working with the health of women in the fish trade. Most women are forced to retire from this work due to medical reasons by the age of 45 to 50 years. Many suffer from chronic problems because of the heavy work. The union has been demanding health compensation and pension for women in the sector.

The union has a membership of around 500 fish vendors in Palghar town alone. It has further members from the nearby villages of Palghar district, which is entirely coastalt. The union sees as its next challenge a proper enumeration of membership, including detailed demographical information. It seeks to conduct workshops and training sessions to build awareness among members with regard to issues faced in the sector, and their rights. Ujwala Patil shared that in Mumbai, the demand of the union includes ownership rights being granted to women vendors in the Bombay Municipal Corporation fish markets. The union also has been demanding reservation of land adjacent to the fishing villages for use by the communities. Women have been actively participating in the government exercise of demarcating the outer boundaries for fishing villages in Mumbai.

The round table highlighted the common issues of women in fisheries and also showed how effective the organised strength of womencan be in terms of gaining rights and benefits

Seeta Dasan of SEWA in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India shared that for SEWA in Kerala, the biggest challenge was the the setting up of a commercial port at Vizhinjam. The fishing community was aware of the consequences of coastal erosion, resulting from even the initial construction activities of the project. Struggles included joining in demonstrations by the various fishing community organizations on the streets of Thiruvananthapuram city, campaigns addressing church organizations and political parties, and taking up the matter with the media. SEWA views the organization as a platform to build unity, and provide a forum to take up issues of women fishworkers in the state.

Seeta Dasan

Street vendors, fish markets and food security

While women in fisheries cope with the challenges of changing market systems, persistent gender inequities threaten to impact livelihoods and food security.

By **Holly M. Hapke**, PhD (drhollyhapke@gmail.com), Director of Research Development, Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, Irvine, USA

New research in southern India, conducted by the Fish4Food Project, reveals that small-scale traders play an important role in ensuring access to fish by the urban poor. By providing low income consumers with small pelagic fish, in particular, small-scale traders support food security as well as contribute to the livelihoods of their own households. Many of the small-scale traders serving the urban poor in southern India are women street vendors who travel on foot from door to door or sit on street corners or in roadside markets. Street vendors are ubiquitous in Asian cityscapes. Yet despite the important role they play in local economies, delivering food and other items to consumers, they enjoy few rights and legal protections, and often face harassment from police and municipal authorities. For women fish traders, these challenges are compounded by other gender-based vulnerabilities and discrimination. Although women fish traders are not a homogenous group – their businesses operate differently based on different capital endowments, where they buy and sell fish, and volume of sales – they nevertheless face a number of common challenges. Women fish traders struggle to acquire affordable credit; they are often denied access to public transport and, in popular culture, 'fish market' and 'fisherwoman' are frequently employed derogatively as metaphors for noisy, raucous, and undesirable behaviour.

Within fish market systems, women traders often face a number of disadvantages because of the way such systems are structured and operate. Research on markets and street vendors around the world reveals that market systems and processes are deeply embedded in—and, indeed, governed by—social factors. Apart from economic considerations such as capital, assets, and scale of operation, social factors such as gender, ethnicity, caste and religious identity underlie power relations and marketplace hierarchies, and, thereby, differentially structure different traders'

HOLLY M. HAPKE

Women fish traders divide jointly purchased fish at Pangode fish market in India. Bulk landings and centralized landing sites, transportation, ice and refrigeration technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing

relationships to the market. For example, who is an insider and who is an outsider determines who has access to fish and who is allowed to sell fish in a particular marketplace. In India, men from trading communities have historically dominated city marketplaces, and women from fishing communities have had to fight for space in which to sell their fish.

Furthermore, gender norms and ideologies define women's work and their mobility in particular ways that impact how they are able to work, and what opportunities and constraints they face as economic development unfolds. Responsibility for unpaid household chores, childcare and other reproductive tasks limits the amount of time at their disposal for engagement in remunerative work, and gendered ideas about women's presence in, and movement through, public spaces limits their mobility. Because market processes are not socially neutral, if new production technology demands shifts in where and when fish is landed, and prevailing gender norms do not support women travelling to distant harbours at night, women may be shut off from sources of cheap fish. Or, if economic transactions become more commercialized, and women traders do not have access to credit because of the way they are socially situated in market hierarchies, they will be negatively impacted as will their households.

Market structures become significant when development interventions are introduced because they inform who benefits and who 'loses' from economic transformations – often in unanticipated ways. For example, if dramatic increases in production favour large-scale merchants buying in bulk over small-scale traders, the latter will be negatively impacted by economic development. In her 1981 book, *Transitional Trade and Rural Development,* Barbara Harriss-White observed: "If Development depends not only on the generation of marketed surplus [increased production] but also on its transfer and redistribution; then … the way this surplus is utilized and redistributed is essential." Thus, the role of fish traders in development becomes a relevant question as does the analysis of the political economy of commerce in a region.

To date, fisheries science and fisheries development policy have suffered from two biases. First is the disproportionate attention to fish production, or harvesting, activities and the relative neglect of fish processing and distribution. Second is a gender bias that has overlooked or minimized women's roles in fish economies. Post-harvest activities have received less attention than fish harvesting in fisheries development initiatives, but these activities are integrally linked to fish production. What happens in one arena dramatically impacts the other. Sixty years of planned development in India has dramatically transformed fish production systems, which, in turn, has transformed systems for the distribution and sale of fish. Planned development in India's fisheries has focused primarily on the introduction of mechanized and motorized production technology, ice and refrigeration technologies, and the construction of modern harbours. Collectively, these technologies have had two impacts. First is an increased size of individual landings. Second is a geographical shift in fish harvesting from decentralised landing sites spread out along the coast to centrally located harbours in a few key sites that can accommodate mechanized boats. Bulk landings and centralised landing sites, ice and refrigeration, along, with improved transportation technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing characterised by increasingly complex commodity chains, linking fish producers in local landing sites to increasingly distant markets and fish traders to new sources of fish supply. In effect, India now has a national fish market in which fish travels all over the country and is available to consumers at an affordable price virtually year-round. While this development has expanded consumer access to fish, for women small-scale fish traders, the impacts are mixed. On the one hand, they have enjoyed increased supply of fish and year-round availability, which has had a stabilising effect over what was, previously, a highly seasonal economy. On the other hand, increasingly commercialised exchange relations and stratified market systems have emerged in which large-scale merchants and commission agents dominate – to the potential detriment of small-scale traders. Although women fish traders have demonstrated creative and entrepreneurial acumen in forging strategies to cope with the challenges of changing market systems, the neglect of post-harvest activities and the exclusion of women from fisheries research priorities and policy have created gender inequities, which could over the long run adversely impact the food security of the urban poor who depend on women small-scale traders to deliver affordable fish.

To read more about the Fish4Food project, see: https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/24/26624.html and http://knowledge4food.net/research-project/gcp3-fish4food-india-ghana/

Gender norms and ideologies define women's work and their mobility in particular ways that impact how, they are able to work and what opportunities and constraints they face as economic development unfolds

In Ockhi's wake

The painful aftermath of Cyclone Ockhi reveals the multiple dimensions of disaster preparedness that still need attention in India

By **Shibani Chaudhury** (shibani.chaudhury@gmail.com), filmmaker and development professional based in New Delhi, India

"It was as dark as night at 9am."
"The waves were higher than a coconut tree."
"We tied ourselves to our boat so our bodies could be recognised..."

30th November 2017. While scientific terms for it were still being confirmed and relayed on land, hundreds of fishworkers at sea were already hit by the violent terror of a deadly cyclonic storm. More than 300 lives were lost, either battling Ockhi, or in the deathly silence after—tragic conquerors of the cyclone who died exhausted, wasted—waiting for rescue that could not reach them.

'God's own country' is the famous cliché used to describe the stunning beauty of coastal Kerala. This holds true for the entire Comorin coast curving into the southernmost tip of India. In April 2018 though, as we travelled the Kerala and Tamil Nadu coast to film our documentary 'In Ockhi's Wake', this tagline bore out a devastating irony. Churches across the region stood stoic witness to the pain of those mourning Ockhi's victims. A shore famed for its intrepid seafaring fishers was left bereft, with unanswered questions and an unprecedented official number of 348 men dead or missing at sea. There were 205 missing in deep sea in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, and 119 near shore and 24 deep sea casualties in Kerala.

Those that perished in deep sea had sailed earlier and were lost due to lack of connectivity. The lives lost near shore were of fishermen who went out just before the onset of the storm, unaware of the warnings of the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) issued on 29th November. Apocalypse, either way. Post Ockhi, many issues are being examined: early warning mechanisms, last mile communication, offshore connectivity, preparedness and training of responders and community, integration of traditional knowledge, post disaster relief and rehab, trauma management. Hopefully the urgency of this will not be forgotten and the gaps will be effectively addressed. Meanwhile, what of the void? For every life lost at sea there are at least two or more connected lives on shore grappling with grief and the desperation of completely altered reality. Aging parents, little children, younger siblings, wives—a trail of anguished families lie devastated in Ockhi's wake.

Vallavilai in Tamil Nadu is known for its skilled deep sea fishers. Of the 33 men lost on mechanised boats from this village, 29 were in their early thirties. In this one village, itself therefore, there are reportedly 20 or more widows in their mid-twenties. In the escalating conversations about preparedness and resilience, do the lives of these nameless women and their small children feature? Except for the efforts of the local parish priest to create therapeutic training centres and build skill, there seems to be no other active support to give these women the agency to take their young lives forward.

And, what of those who came back? Survivors, who faced the ordeal of fighting Ockhi, now struggle through a different agony. They survived the storm only to drown in the ruthless maelstrom of impaired livelihoods, lost investments, and deepening debt. The post disaster learnings must also consider the less visible collateral damage to the lives and livelihood of survivors, in Ockhi's wake.

Editorial note: The documentary film 'In Ockhi's Wake', being made by ICSF, is under production and will be made available on YouTube. Details will be announced in the next issue of *Yemaya*.

Ships of hope

Innovative boat clinics bring health and hope to thousands of men, women and children, among India's poorest, who live along the mighty Brahmaputra river

By **Bhaswati K Goswami** (bhaswatigoswami@yahoo.co.in), Communications Officer, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research(C-NES), New Delhi, India

As the monsoon rages, floodwaters ravage the remote island of Lamba Sapori in Dhemaji district in the northeastern state of Assam in India. Trapped in their waterlogged home, Punyadhar and Oipuli Morang are in dire distress. Their two-year child has had an acute asthmatic attack. There is little they can do, but hope for some help. Time ticks on; each moment's breath a greater burden on the infant. Enter Boat Clinic 'Shahnaz'. On a return trip from a health camp, the boat spots villagers frantically waving at them to stop. Its health team swings to the rescue. Treated with adequate doses of Salbutamol, the child recovers within minutes. For Punyadhar and Oipuli, the team is no less than godsend.

Plying along the mighty Brahmaputra which bisects Assam, sweeping along 891 kms of its territory, before turning south into Bangladesh, are the 'Ships of Hope'. From Dhubri on Assam's southwestern border with Bangladesh, to Tinsukia in the east, the floating clinics have a deep mission to fulfill.

There are over 2.5 million people like Punyadhar and Oipuli inhabiting the islands of the Brahmaputra. Known popularly as *chars* or *saporis*, these are among the most backward areas of Assam. The people here are largely untouched by development activities and remain marginalised, poor and vulnerable. Entire families with young children spend their days in the fields to meet daily needs. Many live in thatched bamboo huts with a small piece of cultivable land. Their homes and farmlands are often temporary in nature, dependent on the whims of the river which often changes its course with ravaging effects on the communities on its banks. There is no access to communications and people are badly hit by recurring floods. Post flood problems—losing homes and assets such as livestock—are common. Children seldom go to school.

The Center for North East Studies and Policy Research's (C-NES') innovative health initiative is aimed precisely at these vulnerable and marginalised communities. The organisation makes an invaluable contribution to their lives through specially designed Boat Clinics.

This unique health clinic story began with a single boat, a prototype called Akha (which means hope in Assamese). Akha received the World Bank's India Development Market Place Award for the year 2004 for unique innovations and transforming the lives of rural communities. With funds from that award, the first boat took shape at Maijanghat, Dibrugarh. From that one boat, the initiative was extended to include nine more.

WWW.C-NES.ORG

Boat clinics in Brahmaputra river, Assam, India. The floating clinics have a mission to fulfill for 2.5 million people inhabiting the islands of the river, who are marginalised, poor and vulnerable

C-NES's Managing Trustee, eminent journalist and writer Sanjoy Hazarika, who conceptualised the programme, says that the outreach is beyond his expectations. "We began with a simple idea, with one boat, in one district—Dibrugarh," says Hazarika. "Today, the implementation of the programme in 13 districts with a staff of nearly 200, including doctors, nurses and paramedics, as well as the unstinted support we have received from NHM and UNICEF shows that truly there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come; we are delivering not just healthcare but enabling people to access their basic right to a better quality of life."

Five of the boats have been financed by the prominent editor and economist, Swaminathan S Aiyar, and named after members of his family. The Boat for the Jorhat Boat Clinic has been donated by Oil India Limited (as part of its golden jubilee celebration). The Sonitpur and Kamrup Boat has been donated by Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL). The remaining are hired boats. They are designed and equipped to conduct basic healthcare services either on the boat or on the riverbanks of the *char/sapori* villages with space for an out-patient department (OPD), a laboratory, pharmacy, cabins for medical staff, kitchen, toilets and crew quarters, equipped with generators, water tanks and powered by 120 hp engines. The Bengaluru-based SELCO Foundation has donated solar panels for four Boat Clinics. There is provision for dental healthcare in the Jorhat and Bongaigaon boats with support from Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Service Ltd as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme.

While the main focus of the initiative, in partnership with National Health Mission (NHM), has been on women and children, its benefits accrue to the population at large in 13 districts across Assam: Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Kamrup, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. In these districts, the Boat Clinics are reaching the poor and marginalised with sustained healthcare for the first time. Many had never seen a doctor, a stethoscope or a syringe ever before. At a Dhemaji Camp, an elated health team was informed by villagers that the first child in their village, whose mother was under the team's supervision for her prenatal check-ups, was named 'Doctor'—a reflection of how much the teams have managed to penetrate communities and make their presence felt and appreciated. Besides medical services, the psychological aid that the programme has brought to these scattered communities is adding to their overall well-being. Problems of alcoholism, depression and hopelessness abound in the islands where dwellers lose whatever little they own, year after year, to the river.

In Dibrugarh's Karmi Chuksapori, 25-year-old Phaguni Payeng, married to a daily wage earner and a mother of four, lived in constant dread of another pregnancy. Repeated childbirth had made her weak, anaemic and unable to work in the fields to supplement the meagre family income. Each year, the river would sweep away her temporary home. Only the previous year she lost her only cow and entire belongings. Her life looked unbearably bleak until a neighbour told her about 'Akha' and the health camps.

The health team has since provided Phaguni with an awareness of and education on family planning methods. The team supplies her with iron tablets in the regular camps, which she attends without fail. It conducts immunisation programmes and regular medical check-ups for her children. Today an optimistic Phaguni asks fellow villagers to attend the camps and follow what the team has to say.

Each district has a total strength of 15 team members. This includes one District Programme Officer (DPO), two Medical Officers, one general nurse cum midwife (GNM), one pharmacist, one laboratory technician, two auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), two community workers and four crew members. The boats go to the islands for three to five days at a stretch with doctors and paramedical staff. Camps usually begin at nine in the morning and continue with a brief break till three in the afternoon, when the team boards the boat for the next destination. After a night's rest, they set out for the next camp. Around 18 to 20 camps are conducted on an average every month. Local communities and leaders are involved in the conduct of the camps, which often are held in difficult conditions with teams battling floods and erosion in the monsoon, and shallow routes and long walking distances to remote villages in the winter.

"At times, we walk six to seven kilometres or more just to get to a village and hold a camp," said a Medical Officer. "But the experience is enriching since the villagers see us as people who are bringing an improvement to their lives; this is visible from our many visits. It is exhausting work but also deeply fulfilling." From Sadiya to Dhubri, children, women, and the elderly crowd the Boat Clinics with health queries and for general check-ups.

There has been a distinct change in attitude, with increasing numbers of young mothers with babies clinging to their backs coming to the immunisation centres

Laboratories which include semi auto-analysers and pharmacies in the boats become functional as soon as the health camps start. Nurses take position in a separate enclosure near the check-up booth that caters to children and women for immunisations, antenatal care (ANC) and postnatal care (PNC). Diarrhoea, dysentery, ear and skin infections (both caused by prolonged exposure to river water, especially among children who are not in school), anaemia and fever are common ailments and most are preventable. The health team gives villagers a lesson or two on maintaining personal hygiene.

There has been a distinct change in attitude, with increasing numbers of young mothers with babies clinging to their backs coming to the immunisation centres. Continuous visits and interactions with the health team with residents have created this transformation. Gone are the days when the very idea of an immunisation team coming to their homes was met with suspicion. There are examples of women asking for family planning because they did not want more children since this could pose a danger to their health. At the close of camps, Medical Officers conduct an interactive session where they speak of the need for family planning, the importance of women's health and that of spacing children. Their audiences listen with rapt interest. This is the Akha model: initiatives, innovativeness, motivation, mobilisation, training, self-help and sustainability, giving all a stake in improving their lives, not just relying on governments and other agencies.

The Boat Clinics have a more popular name—they are called 'Doctor's Boat' by the children of the islands. They run along with the boat on the riverbank, waving their hands in great anticipation as the boat passes by their *sapori,* and continue doing so till it becomes a mere speck in the horizon. And the river quietly flows by..... Y

Beach Profiling for Community Resilience

Women and men in fishing communities in South India work together to generate important beach related data

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India's 7,500 km coastline is a hotbed of transformation. The 'Territorial Sea', where fishing is allowed, provides an exclusive economic zone in the ocean, 60 per cent the size of its land area. India ranks third in world fish production with a harvest of 6.3 million tonnes. India's seas are also habitat to countless forms of marine and terrestrial life.

Beaches already undergo constant natural changes with the movement of sand by wind, waves, tides, currents and littoral drift. Man-made coastal structures, such as industries and ports, along with natural influences, affect coastlines and beaches. Shoreline ecosystems face a threat as we develop and progress without a basic understanding of shoreline dynamics and processes. The Shoreline Change Atlas of the Indian Coast indicates that 45.5 per cent of the coast is under erosion.

India's four million-strong fishing communities, especially on the coast, have seen their livelihoods go through multiple changes from small-scale artisanal fishing, to trawling and mechanised practices. They are vulnerable communities, steadily losing their homes, resources and space for livelihood activities such as boat parking, fish drying and net mending to the ocean as beaches are eroded.

In the state of Tamil Nadu in India, where the 2004 tsunami wreaked maximum damage, aid flew in and changed lives in many fishing communities. However, self-reliance has not been a result of this aid. Small-scale fishermen see dwindling catch, lose out economically to trawlers, and are also losing the coastal land and beach space around where their homes are located.

SNEHA

Women volunteers recording beach profile, Karaikal, India and this programme has encouraged more women volunteers to get involved

Beaches aren't valuable from the standpoint of aesthetics and real estate alone. They form an essential first line of defence against the ravages of the sea, and soften the impact of lashing waves. Sandy beaches and dunes act as buffers, protecting the hinterland from the sea. Beach sand plays a vital role in restricting saline intrusion into the groundwater of coastal regions.

The National Policy on Marine Fisheries in India, gazetted in May 2017, appears biased towards privatisation of fishing practices, while being silent about constant violations to areas traditionally used by fishing communities, especially Coastal Regulation Zone-1 (CRZ-1) areas. In October 2017, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change in India issued an amendment that relaxed guidelines for the mining of atomic minerals like uranium and thorium in CRZ areas. These amendments follow a string of policy changes drafted and passed without prior public consultation.

The proposed Sagarmala project promises to set up five or six mega ports, a host of smaller ports and 14 coastal economic zones. The implications of the Sagarmala project are alarming. Close to 1,500 km inland of the ports are to be claimed for special coastal economic zones. They reinforce how coastal communities most affected by these projects are not considered equal stakeholders in this process. The social, economic and ecological implications of such initiatives that directly affect the shorelines and fishing communities of India need further consideration.

Stewardship of coastal land is the primary challenge for coastal communities. Ground truth verification of land use patterns of coastal communities have not been carried out adequately, or verified with the perspective of access and rights for ownership. Regional resource maps often omit entire beaches and ecological features, to prioritise coastal development.

Sea level rise and the unpredictability of extreme weather events require local communities to play an active role in creating knowledge bases for appropriate action, to reduce disaster risk and recreate a healthy

coastline. Beach profiles can be documented on beaches where there are already specific problems, or a lack of information about the status of the coastline. Examining this data can tell us how individual beaches respond to a variety of ecological phenomena and anthropogenic activities. The Beach Profile Monitoring Programme was envisioned as a way to empower fishing communities with the data, skills and knowledge to observe and understand what is happening to their coastlines, and be stakeholders in the process of building resilience to changes by stewarding their local ecology.

In 2013, Vivek Coelho, of the Social and Ecological Stewardship Programme (SESP), Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India initiated work in Puducherry on a mandate to work with fishing communities and create a citizen science programme. Interacting with advocacy groups and local communities led to ideas on measuring erosion and accretion patterns.

Stewardship of coastal land is the primary challenge for coastal communities

The goal was to document and create locale specific evidence on shoreline dynamics in terms of erosion and accretion patterns of the beach; and to study beach features through sand grain size analysis and photo documentation. Understanding and documenting beach profiles and sand grain sizes provide basic tools for communities to strengthen their relationship as stewards of coastal ecology.

One method to do this, proposed in 1961 by K.O. Emery, is beach profiling, based on readings taken on the days of the lowest tide, with the use of two graduated poles, whose alignment and intersection with the horizon allow for the determination of elevation change along the profile line. The readings are taken along the profile line of a fixed structure on the beach, known as a 'control point' up to the low water mark. These are then calculated and plotted on a graph to document the profile of the beach in question. The graphs represent the length from the control point to the low water mark and elevation change along this profile line—the contour of the beach. Anyone with a basic working knowledge of reading, writing and mathematics can record and calculate readings. Sand grain size analysis reveals information about effects of tidal influences and man-made factors. It also reveals the presence of magnetic and mineral properties in beach sand.

Coastal communities did respond to initial training but with reluctance. Fisherpeople's lives are burdened with daily labour, commitment to their trade, additional jobs if necessary, running households and caring for children. They have little time to spare to take cognizance of the beach around them and engage in citizen science or research. This was felt strongly in the state of Puducherry in India, where community mobilisation was a challenge.Another hurdle was the cost of the equipment used in the Emery method. The calibrated poles are fairly expensive, and impossible for fishing communities to access. Coelho first used wooden poles, two metres in length with one metre steel scales pasted onto them.

The equipment was bulky, and a five metre long thread was used to space the interval between the two poles. Thread and fingers were used as viewfinders to fix readings with reference to the horizon. The equipment proved to be bulky, expensive, and hard to maintain. Expensive equipment would make it challenging to expand the programme and work with more communities.

Finally, Vivek replaced the calibrated poles with PVC-U pipes and measuring tape, with women's hair ties as viewfinders. This method was formulated and termed the 'Adapted Emery Method for Beach Profiling'. It proved low cost, effective, lightweight, transport friendly and easy to maintain. With an annual cost of Rs 10,000 (USD150) to sustain the entire annual data collection process, the equipment is finally accessible to coastal communities. Engaging the interests of these communities, however, is more challenging. In recent years, industrial expansion into coastal areas has altered lives and livelihoods. Coastal communities can observe how changes in littoral drift and sand movement affect erosion and accretion patterns. But community interest needs to grow to address the changes that cause these occurrences.

The support of veterans working with coastal communities who understood ground realities encouraged community involvement in citizen science. The programme was lucky to build a partnership in the year 2014 with two NGOs, SNEHA (Social Need Education and Human Awareness) and LAW (Legal Aid to Women) Trust in the Nagapattinam region in Tamil Nadu, each of which had a long term relationship with the coastal community. Together, the team trained staff and volunteers to understand their ecological and environmental surroundings in the context of disasters. Trainings also included the processes to record monthly beach profile readings, make calculations based on these readings, plot graphs, and archive the data after every session.

Initially, community members and panchayat (village administration) leaders were nonplussed at the initiative. As a voluntary effort that did not offer monetary benefits and used up precious community time, it was deemed an unwise use of resources.

The manual, *A Tide Turns*, was written to make this initiative accessible to all coastal communities at risk from climate change. As training sessions continued, individuals displayed an interest and pride in understanding and mapping local beaches. The activity of beach profiling promoted principles of teamwork and leadership in volunteers and staff. Volunteers understood the correlation between graphs and what they saw on site; they learnt how to operate high-end cameras, manage a group, and more. They also created a database of monthly reports with readings for the locations archived at the community. Volunteers and external parties can now use the manual as a detailed do-it-yourself (DIY) guide to set up their own beach profiling initiatives.

Coastal communities eventually accepted the programme's benefits and showed support by offering temples, halls and other community spaces for volunteers to calculate readings, analyse sand grains, store equipment, have meals and so on. Fisherwomen in these communities were trained to collect data. Currently, there is an active engagement of the youth, both male and female, in the data collection effort, with older women and men playing a supportive role. In fact, the support that women have extended to the beach profiling programme has encouraged more female volunteers to get involved.

As the programme becomes a part of community life, grooms leaders and offers them ownership over their data, the way forward would be to use such locale specific data to create a healthy coastline. Local organisations and governance bodies could use the programme as an entry point to develop the practice of stewardship, the spirit of volunteerism and to initiate efforts that use traditional knowledge systems to address the urgent need for restoration and regeneration of local ecologies. The initiative's preparedness and mitigation action plans could improve community resilience and build ecological integrity.

Beach restoration is more than keeping beaches clean. It is a holistic approach to recognise eroding, vulnerable beaches and regenerate them. Soft solutions include planting sand binding varieties, indigenous coastal vegetation and building sand dunes. Exploring ecologically aligned and sustainable livelihoods can build community resilience, restore ecology and create a cadre of first responders in the context of disasters.

Evaluating ongoing and proposed development activities along the coast with an ecological lens, and ensuring effective coastal planning requires location specific data to inform decision making processes. India's commitment to implement Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a step towards protecting coastlines. SDG 14 prioritises conservation and the sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources. Community-led ecological monitoring and context specific coastal resource stewardship is critical to disaster risk reduction and should be non-negotiable in the implementation of SDG 14. The programme is open to partner and share knowledge with all stakeholders and decision making bodies to ensure scalability along the Indian coast. Our partner organisations and community volunteers have undergone a 'Resource Stewardship Leadership Development Programme'—specially designed by the SESP-TISS team, with support and supervision from Dr. Monica Sharma, a former director of leadership and capacity development with the United Nations.

The extensive length of India's coastline and its administrative jurisdiction under ten states makes it challenging for government agencies to monitor the coast. With a fishing village located almost every two kilometres along the coast, community monitoring of beaches using citizen science can provide the data to understand the changing dynamics of our beaches. More importantly, it provides a platform to usher in coastal resource stewardship.

Community-led ecological monitoring and context specific coastal resource stewardship is critical to disaster risk reduction and should be non-negotiable in the implementation of SDG 14

Roadmap for survival

In a two-day interactive workshop, women fishworkers in Kolkata, India, discussed strategies for future struggle and organizing

By **Pradip Chatterjee** (pradipdisha@gmail.com), President of Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) and Convener of National Platform for Small-scale Fishworkers (Inland), India

The contribution of women fishworkers in India has been at least equal to that of men. However, despite being a colossal human resource that plays a significant role in food security, income and employment generation, women have been systematically discriminated against, both socially and economically.

Based in West Bengal in India, the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), a fishworkers' organization, has been facing many difficulties in mobilizing women workers. At a time when we are witnessing an all round attack on natural resource based livelihood options, including fishing, the mobilization of women fishworkers to protect water, fish and fisherpeople is of critical importance.

Experience has taught the DMF that in order to build independent women fishworker's organizations, two factors are important: one, the identification of the problems that women face both as fishworkers and as women, as well as the means to address these problems; and two, the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

In that context, the DMF organised two workshops with women fishworker activists. The first was held in collaboration with the Rabindra Bharati University on 30-31 March 2016; and the second was organized at Namkhana in West Bengal on 1-2 June 2017. These two workshops were complementary in their aims. The first tried to identify the problems faced by women fishworkers and means to address the problems. The second tried to identify the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

SOMENATH BHATTACHARJEE

Inaugural session of the workshop on Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive, 15-16 June 2017, Kolkata, India

Building on the observations, findings and recommendations of the workshops, the DMF then organized a state level workshop on 15-16 June 2017, at Seva Kendra in Kolkata, in collaboration with two organizations, DISHA and ActionAid. Titled 'Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive,' the workshop witnessed the participation of 40 women fishworker representatives from six districts of West Bengal, three women fishworker leaders from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, four representatives from ActionAid and DISHA, and eight office bearers of DMF and its branches.

The inaugural session was chaired by the President of DISHA, Santanu Chacraverti. Welcoming the participants, Sasanka Dev, Secretary of DISHA, pointed out that such workshops were very important to develop a better understanding of the issues that women fishworkers face. Following a round of self-introduction by the participants, Milan Das, General Secretary, DMF, delivered the opening address for the workshop. He highlighted the activities pursued by the DMF in organizing the women fishworkers in West Bengal, emphasizing the important role played by women activists. Next, Jesu Rethinam, a woman fishworker leader from Tamil Nadu, spoke on the national perspective of the women fishworkers' struggle. She stressed upon the need for strengthening their struggles at the national level and listed out several impending threats to the livelihood of fishworkers, including the dilution of the Coastal Regulation Zone 2011 Notification, which provided fishing communities a measure of protection; development measures such as the creation of industrial and economic corridors along the coasts; and the Sagarmala project, a port modernization venture. The session concluded with an address by the session chair.

The next session, on livelihood issues and concerns, was chaired by Shilpa Nandy, Executive Member, DISHA. Two presentations were made. The first discussed the findings

The mobilization of women fishworkers to protect water, fish and fisherpeople is of critical importance

of a primary study conducted on women fishworkers in West Bengal. The second discussed the conclusions of the two workshops held earlier on women fishworkers' issues. Pradip Chatterjee made the first presentation. He presented the main findings of the study, which included the status of women fishworkers and the problems they face at different levels, for example, with respect to family, society, education, financial inclusion, income, occupation and self-organization. Shilpa Nandy, who made the second presentation, pointed out that the two earlier workshops were actually complementary to each other: one came out with detailed recommendations on the demands of different categories of women fishworkers, while the other detailed the need for separate organizational initiatives for women fishworkers to carry forward their demands.

The next session started with the screening of a documentary on the women canoe fishers of Kultoli that depicted the lives and livelihood struggles of women fishing in the difficult waters of the mangrove-rich Sundarbans, who face the risk of tiger and crocodile attacks on the one hand, and of torture and harassment by staff of the forest department, on the other.

The third session, chaired by Manasi Bera, Executive Member, DMF, was on organizational issues and concerns. Milan Das introduced the idea of a separate women's organization and the possible forms such an organization might take. After that, the women fishworker participants joined a group exercise on organizational planning. The participants formed themselves into four groups, according to their occupational categories, to work out suggestions and recommendations with respect to possible organizational forms for women fishworker organizations to take up their issues.

Thereafter, these groups presented their main suggestions. These included forming women fishworker organizations in various occupational sectors with the exclusive or main participation of women; forming women fishworker platforms at all organizational levels of and in all areas covered by the DMF, and also, the need for adequate and effective representation of women in the various DMF committees.

Pradip Chatterjee, in a special rejoinder, recalled the experience of women's participation in the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) and the efforts taken by leaders like Thomas Kochery and Harekrishna Debnath in the matter. He also pointed out some of the limitations that may be encountered in the effort and commented on the role that women's organizations can play in producing and activating women's leadership in both fishworkers' unions and in society at large. He stressed however that the issue has political and cultural significance and linkages, and that these need to be understood by the women leaders.

Manasi Bera ended the session with concluding remarks.

Changing tides

Labour shortage has improved work conditions for women in seafood processing in Kerala, India, although gender equality in employment is still a distant dream

By **Nikita Gopal** (nikiajith@gmail.com), Principal Scientist, ICAR-Central institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin, India

Seafood processing factories all over the world are dependent on women's labour. India is no exception. The work in the factories is generally monotonous and full of drudgery. The work environment is not very comfortable, as the workplace temperature and conditions are geared to maintain the quality of the product. Almost all the women are engaged on a contractual basis, with the piece rated daily wages regulated by the number of 'baskets' they process. Men are more likely than are women, to have permanent jobs and higher wages in these factories.

The labour force in the initial decades of growth of the seafood processing sector in India largely came from the southern state of Kerala. This was the situation even as late as until the late 1990s and early 2000s. The women were recruited by labour contractors, and taken to work in factories in other coastal states. The exploitative conditions of their work have been reported in many studies. The situation started changing towards the end of the last millennium. In many states, local women came into the sector and began seeking employment. This suited the factory management as the additional expense on providing logistic facilities reduced. However in Kerala, with lower participation of local women in this work, the fish processing factories were faced with severe labour shortages. To keep the factories functional, women workers had to be brought in from other states. Initially they were organized through labour contractors, or through friends already working in the state. Most of these women did not have the requisite skills to work in the factories. This led to special job training programmes organized by the factory management. Lack of good skills can lead to loss of production and value. It is pertinent to note that despite the high skill requirements, at no time has adequate recognition been given to the women or to their work in this sector.

The changing dynamics of labour availability in the fish processing sector in Kerala has changed the tide in favour of women workers. Though wages cannot be called 'high', they have improved. The migrant women are paid, on an average, Rs 5700 (USD 88.8) per month, and the local women, slightly higher wages at Rs 6500 (USD 101.2) per month. Most factories provide accommodation, transportation, and food at subsidized rates, or facilities for cooking, to their workers. The accommodation usually comes with proper toilet facilities (about one toilet for four workers) and certain basic features, including television sets. Factories incur additional investments for training migrant labour, and in order to prevent 'poaching' of trained workers, management usually has to keep the labour force content. These conditions apply to the seafood processing sector in Kerala, and, in the absence of adequate information, whether similar conditions obtain in other parts of India is difficult to say.

The major factor responsible for the improvement of employment conditions for women has been the shortage of labour in the sector. Further, the requirements of certifications and audits in export factories also include adherence to some minimum labour standards, and this again gets reflected in positive changes in working conditions. Women workers are aware of their improved bargaining capacity, and are able to use this to better their situation.

According to a recent study, migrant women from other states accounted for more than 75 per cent of the labour force in export oriented seafood processing factories in the Ernakulam-Alappuzha belt of Kerala. Around 85 per cent of the migrant women were single and the average age was around 21 years. Most of the women did not return to work after marriage.

In contrast, the average age of local women employed in the sector was around 40 years. Younger women were reluctant to seek employment in the sector. The local women workers were still considered very efficient and skilled. They did not work night shifts. In case work required them to stay late or work night shifts, transportation was provided by the factories.

The study showed however that women continued to earn less than men; and migrant women earned less than local women. Men earned an average of Rs 7600 (USD 118.4) per month, or about 17 per cent more than the local women, and 34 per cent more than the migrant women workers.

Round table of women in fisheries

A state-wide round table of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, India, not only reveals a range of priority issues but also starts a process of self-organization

By **Mariette Correa** (mariettec@gmail.com), Senior Programme Co-ordinator, ICSF

On the 19 February, 2017, a round table of 30 women in various small-scale fisheries related activities was held in Goa, India. This meeting was a follow-up to a workshop held in November 2016 where 63 women from the coastal districts of India gathered together for three days to discuss the issues they faced, and to learn about the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) as well as schemes and laws relevant to them and how these could be used. Five women from Goa participated in the November workshop and were motivated to carry forward the work in their state. It also resonated for Saad Aangan, a Goa-based gender resource group, which has felt the need over the years, to consolidate the experiences of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, to take the concerns forward.

Not much has been done at the state level in Goa on the issues faced by women in small-scale fisheries. Their concerns have been subsumed under the overall issues of small-scale fishing communities which come to the fore when there are specific incidents or immediate threats to their livelihoods, as, for example, with the pressures on the coastal lands or waters due to development or tourism. Therefore, to begin with, there was a need to collect information and meet with various groups or representatives of women involved in fisheries, including those who were involved with local level struggles.

Representatives of Saad Aangan and Internationa Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) visited parts of Goa to meet with women. It soon became apparent that certain occupational groups (represented by individual women) would be unable to come to the meeting on 19 Febuary. They were asked to share their concerns which were then presented in the larger group at the round table. Across Goa, there are small markets where a few women (between three and eight, on an average) sit either on the streets or in the markets selling their fish. They travel to the big towns in the early hours of the morning, buy the fish from the wholesalers and then travel back in time to get the morning customers at the market squares. These women survive on their daily earnings and being absent for a day would cause considerable loss. More importantly, many of them are cynical about a resolution of their issues, and may not be sufficiently convinced about the idea of presenting their issues to larger groups nor feel their issues are representative of many other women in similar situations. Some, in fact, pointed to the wholesalers who they said would know of their issues, have helped them in the past and could represent them. However, post the round table it was clear that more efforts would need to be placed on meeting with these women and hearing about their problems in more detail.

The workshop was largely interactive with women from different groups talking about the issues they faced. As a questionnaire had been shared with the groups when they were invited, they had come prepared to discuss the issues they faced in terms of access to resources, markets, health, education, housing, violence and discrimination.

Most of the participants at the round table were in fish vending, from traditional fishing communities. For the majority of the participants, it was the first time that they were speaking in large gatherings about the problems they were facing. Though they came from different parts of the state and represented different communities and groups, there were a lot of common issues that they faced. They spoke about the threat to the livelihoods of their traditional fishing communities and the lack of protective measures. They lamented the lack of spaces in the markets and being gradually edged away from prime locations in the local markets due to other vendors. In certain areas, fish vendors from outside the municipality or *panchayat* (local administrative unit) boundaries sold their fish on the roads or any open area just outside the fish market, reducing the sale of the traditional users of the market. Within the markets, they deplored the lack of water and toilet facilities, and the lack of storage facilities. In several places, the markets were in need of repair and there were inadequate light facilities.

Another problem in recent years that the women faced was the lack of regulations of market timings. Due to the purse seiners, wholesalers arrived at the markets at different times during the day, and vendors came in

from various parts of the state to sell fish. This resulted in huge fluctuations in prices over the day, affecting sales of the traditional users. Traditional vendors have been asking for regulations in market timings to prevent this, but to no avail.

In the capital city of Panjim, the fish market was in a disastrous condition, they said. Alongside the fish vendors were the sellers of meat products, preventing customers from coming to the fish market due to the smells. The lack of regulation of timings in the markets meant that the market was never closed long enough for it to be properly cleaned.

The sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women have decided to come together and self- organise.

The government-supported mobile vans for fish vendors were also creating problems for the local vendors. The vans were given on condition that they would be parked in, or travel to, villages where there were no local markets and that they would sell fish at five per cent less than the market rate. However, these vans were parked near the town markets creating competition for the local fisherwomen with their reduced prices. Similarly, cycle vendors purchasing from wholesalers in the markets were selling door-to-door in the villages, reducing customers in the markets. This was being done without the clear permission of the *panchayats* or municipalities.

There being no clear rule about the annual *sopo* (a traditional tax collected by the municipalities/*panchayats*), different amounts were collected in the markets, either according to person, load or space occupied. Women from some remote areas were adversely affected by this when the rates were increased for no ostensible reason. The street vendors along highways or in smaller markets, faced the problems of lack of safe spaces and shelter from the wind, rain, dust on the roads.

The reduced access to fish for sale and for drying fish was experienced across the state, with women having to work longer hours, leading to health problems. They also experienced threats to their land and water resources due to tourism, construction activities, 'development projects' like casinos, and industrial fishing in Goa and neighbouring states. They pointed out the lack of political will and weak governance systems to deal with their problems. Several participants were part of communities that had complained or appealed to the authorities to protect their interests, but nothing much had been done.

Dr Smita Mazumdar, Superintendent of Fisheries, shared the few schemes available for women like provision of ice boxes, loans at low interest rates for fisheries related activities, and funds for 'construction of fish markets'. She said that Rs. five lakhs (approximately, USD 7,500) was available under the last scheme, which was underutilized though the fisheries department had been asking the *panchayats* for their proposals. She informed the group about the requirements to access these, as well as the roles of the fisheries inspectors, surveyors and officers, and who could be approached. Women shared their concerns with her about the implementation issues with some of the schemes, as well as their problems which went far beyond welfare schemes. They were amazed to learn of a new central government scheme which would be implemented by the Goa government, where fish vendors would get Rs. 30,000 subsidy for the purchase of certain brands of motorbikes. The women were upset with this new information. In their view, the schemes would only strengthen those with cycles or who could be mobile—mainly men—further impacting the local market vendors who were already suffering due to the cycle fish vendors.

Success stories were also shared, where women were organized and their federation's demands were not ignored, when the market had to be renovated. The redeveloped market has to an extent been made in accordance with their requirements. Even so, they were facing a lot of difficulties due to the lack of storage space and shelter, and the fact that they have to pay for the use of the toilet and for water.

The fish farms in Goa are largely improved traditional ponds and are owned by families or by the *communidade* (a form of communally-held land association) who lease out the ponds annually or for several years. Most of the farms are monoculture, and the government provides subsidies and training. A few farms are owned by women. The representatives from the fish farms at the round table spoke about the lack of support from the local administration for infrastructure for the fish farms for the economically backward sections.

Participants were informed about the SSF Guidelines, its key guiding principles and its relationship to the issues raised by the women. The importance of social auditing and monitoring of the implementation of the schemes, how the Guidelines could be used to support capacity building of women and strengthening of their associations or collectives, and how elements of the Guidelines could be used to advocate for their interests were discussed. The lack of schemes for women in fisheries in Goa pointed to the lack of recognition of women's work.

The women raised various demands in the course of the round table. They called for transparency and accountability in the design of markets and accountability at all levels.

They made a concerted demand for proper markets, and that women fish vendors be consulted in their design so that it considers their needs. They stressed the need for ice to be provided by the government for small-scale vendors. They demanded that toilets needed to be constructed and maintained in the markets and that water facilites and adequate spaces for storage be provided. They emphasized the need to regulate the timings for wholesalers and vendors in each market, and that ID cards be provided to women vendors who have traditional rights over the markets.

They demanded that fisheries inspectors ensure that there were no vendors just outside the markets and that cycle and rickshaw vendors as well as mobile vans plied in areas where there were no markets. They also demanded the formulation of regulations on where fish markets could be set up. They felt that women vendors should be entitled to pensions and social security schemes, as was being done for the motorcycle pilots in Goa. They asked that certain schemes of the Department of Fisheries could be extended to others (for example, the schemes for rampon nets could be extended to other nets or fishing gear in the *agor/ khazan* or estuarine lands). Finally, as the capital city was being converted to a smart city, the women vendors would like to collaborate with the Fisheries Department to propose a model fish market.

Importantly, the sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women decided to come together and self-organize to raise their concerns to the authorities, with the support of Saad Aangan. Representatives of each locality took on the responsibility to organize local meetings to raise the issues and look at the formation of associations or groups. They also decide to explore the possibility of having joint meetings at the local levels with *panchayat* authorities, women vendors and the fisheries department. A delegation would meet with the Director of Fisheries and other concerned departments shortly to formally present their demands.

Cooperative Action

Many opportunities for increased participation of women are open to a fisheries cooperative in an underprivileged community in Maharashtra, India

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Maharashtra is a prominent fishing state in India, with a coast line of 720 km and a fisher population of around 450,000, of whom around 55,000 are active fishers. The state has 304 registered primary marine fisheries cooperatives with a total membership of 114,000. The fisheries cooperatives are part of the strong producer-cooperative sector of rural Maharashtra with a history of over 100 years.

The fisheries cooperatives are formed with the objectives of production and marketing of fish. Many cooperatives have diversified their operations and added ancillary activities such as rendering economic assistance to fishers, undertaking grading, preservation, storage, transport and processing of fish. They also supply necessary fishery requisites like nets, ropes, oil and other requirements to cooperative members on economical rates.

The Adivasi Koli Machhimar Sahkari Sanstha (Tribal Fishermen Cooperative Society) is a cooperative with members from the Scheduled Caste community of the village Shrivardhan of Raigad district in Maharashtra. It was established in the year 1999 to improve competitiveness of its members through services, supply of fishery inputs and access to Government benefit schemes for the fishing community.

SHUDDHAWATI S PEKE / ICSF

The Cooperative members generally sell their own catch as the Cooperative is not able to provide marketing support to their members

The Cooperative Society has its own office building, office furniture and computers at the centre of village connected with telephone and internet facility. It owns assets worth around INR 840,000 (USD 12666). It has 162 members, all from the so-called Scheduled Caste community called Mahadev Koli. Ten members have Below Poverty Line (BPL) status, which serves as an entitlement to certain welfare provisions. Around sixty members were reported to be illiterate. This illiteracy was found especially among women members and the elderly. Most of the younger members were educated.

The male members of the cooperative are engaged in trawl net, *dol* net, gill net and traditional fishing practices. Seven members own trawlers. Twelve members have businesses related to *dol* net operations. Only one member operates with gill nets and there are no purse-seine net operators. There are 35 women members in the Society. They are involved in either fish processing or marketing of fresh or dry fishes in the local market.

The Cooperative members generally sell their own catch as the Cooperative is not able to provide marketing support to their members. Hence, data on quantum of fish caught by members of is not available with their office. Members sell their fish catch through auction at the landing centre of village after every fishing trip.

The Cooperative Society functions according to the Indian Cooperative Society Act of 1960. Its activities fall under the purview of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies of Raigad district. The Cooperative accounts are audited every year by an internal auditor as well as a Government auditor. The Cooperative holds an Annual General Meeting every year when the annual accounts are presented and passed and important decisions are ratified.

The Board of Management meets every month to discuss administration and financial issues. Two women members are part of the Board of Management. It was however observed that women's participation in the decision making of the Cooperative was poor. Most decisions were being taken by men. Women were not much aware of the operations of the cooperative

and most did not attend the Annual General Meetings.

The Cooperative Society has three permanent employees, all from Scheduled Caste community.

The main functions of the Cooperative are supply of subsidized diesel to members, and getting members insured under Group Insurance schemes implemented by Maharashtra Government. However, many Government schemes and services meant for the Scheduled Caste community are not being accessed by the Cooperative. The Cooperative leadership attributed the poor implementation of Government schemes to reasons such as lack of awareness, complex documentation requirement for availing Government schemes and lack of financial assistance from nationalized banks.

Members felt that the Cooperative should take initiative in marketing of fish catch, providing infrastructure facilities for landing and berthing of vessels, providing basic facilities at landing centres such as electricity, roads, drinking water, ice plant and fishery requisites shops. They also felt the Cooperative should proactively work to avail various Government schemes.

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Evocations of the Sea

A recent music concert in Bengaluru, India explored the universal metaphor of the ocean in mystic poetry—a space beyond identity where social divisions such as those of gender, class, caste and race hold little meaning

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(*Editor's note: Film maker Shabnam Virmani, and the author of this piece, the poet Vipul Rikhi – singers both - are part of the Kabir Project (www.kabirproject.org), initiated in 2003, which explores contemporary spiritual and socio-political resonances of mystic poets, such as the 15th century north Indian mystic, Kabir, through songs, images and conversations.)*

"Evocations of the Sea"—this is how we titled our music concert, which was to be the final session of a 3-day conference on 'Exploring the Scope of collaborations in Marine Biology and Biotechnology between France and India', held at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru, India from 7-9 March 2016, organized jointly by IISc and Dakshin Foundation. When my colleague Shabnam Virmani and I were approached to present an evening of music as part of this conference, we mused upon how the ocean is evoked in the folk music of Kabir and other Bhakti and Baul poets of India.

The sea is a field of mystery, just as life is, and so it becomes a common theme and metaphor within mystic poetry. Life itself is often described as *bhavsaagar*, or the ocean of becoming. And we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

The very first song we presented speaks of an ocean which is full of jewels!

Your ocean is full of precious jewels
Some brave pearl-diver will bring them up

The word for pearl-diver in Hindi is *marjeeva*, which literally means one who dies in order to live again. The pearl-diver plunges to his or her death, into the depths of the ocean, and when s/he comes up again, it's as if s/he were born anew. This becomes a powerful spiritual metaphor for Kabir and other poets, to indicate this practice of dying to oneself again and again.

The pearl-divers' country is a wondrous land
An aimless one can't reach there
One on the path knows the diver's pulse
Now she cannot be swayed from her path

Giving up the self, she sits in the ocean
And fixes her attention on the pearl
She brings back that beautiful jewel
Now there is no leaving this ocean

The second song that we sang was also a folk tune from the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh in central India, like the first one. It advises the seeker to ride the waves of the ocean.

Taste the waves of the ocean, friend
Pearls aren't found by plunging into puddles!

The depth and vastness of the ocean here becomes a figure for a wider and freer way of being, which has the reward of a 'pearl'. This is contrasted with much shallower ways of being, clinging to small and limited identities and notions of self.

As both these songs show, the ocean immediately invokes a sense of vastness. Neither Kabir, nor many of the singers who have sung these songs for centuries, lived by the sea. And yet it is a powerful presence in the human imagination, provoking poetry and a sense of the expanse of life.

In January this year we met Dhruv Bhatt, a contemporary poet who writes in Gujarati. As we travelled with him over a period of a few days, he revealed to us how many of his poems 'come to him' as songs—that is, along with the tune. Lovingly he taught us these songs, in many of which the ocean is a strong presence. We presented two of his songs as part of the concert, presenting him in some sense as a contemporary mystic poet, and his songs have a strong folk flavour.

The first one is a delightful song which has a story behind it. Once Dhruvdada (elder brother) was doing a walking pilgrimage along the banks of the Narmada, a river considered holy, which originates in central India and flows to the west coast. On a hot day, he came across a poor farmer hard at work, sweating away in his small field. Moved, Dhruv dada approached him and asked him how he was doing. Flashing a thousand watt smile, the farmer looked up at him and said: "I'm full of joy!" It was an unexpected moment of transformation. It shifted something in Dhruvdada's approach to the man, and to himself. And later this poem came to him as a song.

If, suddenly, I were to come across
Someone on the way
And if they were to ask me
Softly,
"How are you doing today?"
Then I would say,
Nature is so bountiful
And like waves in the ocean
I'm at play!

When we first heard this song, we were utterly taken with it. It describes the joy and play of the ocean. In fact, the same word in Hindi (*mauj*) can be used for both 'wave' and 'joy' – and the poet puns on this through the song.

Life is often described as ... the ocean of becoming... we have somehow to cross or navigate this ocean, which throws us about, with skill.

In my torn trouser-pocket hide
Many joyful, dancing waves
Even when alone
I'm in a carnival each day
…
Water in the eyes comes and goes
But the moistness within never dries
The shore may keep accounts
Of less and more
The ocean doesn't bother about such scores
The sun may rise and set everyday
The sky over me is always the same

(See words and translation of the full song here, as well as a downloadable audio version: http://cityoffeeling.blogspot.in/2016/03/ochintu-koi-raste-made.html)

The other song of Dhruvdada which we sang also evokes the sea as a place of joy and bounty. On one side, it says, is the ocean with its waves; on the other, is the fertile, green earth. There is joy as far as the eye can see.

We also sang a song of Kabir which describes the journey of a boat. My boat is now sailing smoothly, says Kabir. It has fear neither of shallow nor of deep waters, no terror of storm or rain, no anxiety of turning upside down. This is because it has found the right navigator, the guru who is guiding its path.

But this guru, the boatman, is a somewhat strange figure.

Kabir says the one who rows
Without a head
Only he can point out this path
This is an untellable tale
Of great benediction
Only a rare boatman
Can describe it

And so we arrive into tales of headless boatmen! When we seek to navigate these waters with our limited minds, perhaps we are led astray. But when we give up our need for control and allow ourselves to be guided by something larger, a great benediction appears. Could this be the 'untellable' import of this song?

The sixth and final song we presented was a Baul song (from the Bengal region in the east of India) by a famous Baul fakir and poet called Lalon Fakir. It is a call in a simple and full voice. The poet is asking to be 'taken across'. He says that he cannot see the way. He has been left all alone on this shore, and the sun is setting on the horizon. Things appear dark, and this plea is his only support. In his helplessness, he still finds the strength to call out for help.

We had never before curated a whole concert just around the sea. It was a beautiful experience for Shabnam and me, to immerse in these waters, and perhaps come out on the other shore, refreshed.

(All translations by Vipul Rikhi)

Hard days and nights

Hardships at work, a lack of support at home, and little or no social security combine to create a bleak future for women fishsellers in Mangalore, India

By **Ellen Thorell** (ellen.sigrid.thorell@gmail.com), Graduate Student in Human Ecology

Mangalore is a port city situated in the west coast state of Karnataka in India. The city hosts both large-scale and small-scale fisheries along its coastline. Traditionally, fishermen catch the product and sell it at a daily auction in the harbour to women vendors, who thereafter transport the goods to the market for commercial sale. The trade starts early in the morning, when the fishermen return to the harbour from their nightly fishing. The women fish vendors therefore also start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold or the sun goes down. One woman described her working day: "I have to sit around a lot, and that makes my body ache. It's also very hot in the sun and my eyes hurt. I have to take medicines for pain, and am often too unwell to work and am forced to stay at home for days in a row."

The marketplace is very hot, humid and unhygienic, with mosquitoes everywhere. The women have to sit in uncomfortable positions all day, which is bad for their health. They also need to work long hours to make the work profitable. All the women said that they would generally be at work as long as the sun was up. They claimed that if the lights at the market had been functioning they would have worked even longer hours. They work through the year. One woman said that she sold fish on all except six days in a year. Older women vendors find it difficult to sustain a reasonable income from the profession.

ELLEN THORELL

Auction at Bund fish market, India. The women fish vendors start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold

On an average, a fish vendor makes around Rs 100 (USD 1.50) a day. There could be days when the market is slow, and she ends up with no profit or even a loss for the day. This economic model has forced women into taking loans daily. Most fish vendors do not have any savings, and many have substantial debts. Given their financial status the vendors cannot access banks, and are forced to borrow money from private lenders, very often at usurious rates of interest.

The women have to pay a fee of Rs 10 (USD 0.15) per day to the city corporation for their vendor space in the market. This works out to around a tenth of their daily income. For this payment, the vendors do not get any service from the corporation, beyond the use of the market space. The corporation does not feel obliged to arrange for waste removal, lighting, etc. Discontent with the way in which the marketplace is organized and the total lack of any facilities has provoked the vendors in the past to organize strikes and protests. However, these protest actions have not got them any real attention from the corporation, whose office bearers add that such protests are not their concern but rather an issue for the police.

The women get their livelihood from local fish stocks but have no control over how fish reserves are exploited. They therefore also face future declines in the amount of fish available for daily sales.

After an entire day, from dawn to dusk, spent in procuring fish and selling it at the marketplace, the women return home to all the tasks of housework. The domestic sphere is their sole responsibility, and they get no support from husbands. This daily grind of sweaty work in extremely poor working conditions, followed by the total lack of support from husbands towards sustaining the family, leaves the women with very little energy to even think of changing their lives or destiny. It robs them of energy to stick up for their rights and protest against the daily oppression. Society also reinforces this view of them being relatively powerless. According

to a former union activist, women are neither viewed by society, nor even by themselves, as able to shape their own destinies. The social structures determined by poverty, gender and class that surround them, form their identities and deny them the spirit to try and change their circumstances.

What, then, are the possibilities for effecting improvement and benefiting fish vendors? First, communication between the women and different local institutions must be improved. The women should be empowered to have greater influence in the decisions regarding the market structure, as this deeply affects their dignity and democratic rights. The corporation must also be prevailed upon to visit the market and gain more local knowledge. Today, they only get the information once a year, through a third party, and this is not sufficient. The local community must also provide better legislation concerning the exploitation of the resource to avoid over-fishing. On a socio-economic level, in order to increase the vendor's level of agency, it would be beneficial to provide better security such as sickness benefits. Thereby, women might not need to take daily loans and end up trapped in debt. The union's solution is focused on providing more favourable loans. While beneficial in the current circumstances, this might not help in the long run. Finally, opportunities for education for young women in the fisheries sector will give them the opportunity to switch to other sectors if the fish sector breaks down.

Receding waters, vanishing trades

With the decline of waters in the rivers surrounding the city of Patna in north India, women in fishing communities of the region are facing mounting hardships

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Patna, the capital city of the state of Bihar in North India, is located on the southern bank of the Ganga river. The city is surrounded by the Ganga and its tributaries: the Sone and the Punpun. Inland fishing used to be an important traditional livelihood source in the city. However, as the waters in the rivers recede continuously, fish capture has declined by 70 per cent in just a decade. This has had a dire impact on the fishing communities of Patna and its surrounding areas. Today, traditional modes of fishing in the region have given way to contract systems, whereby annual fishing rights are auctioned to private contractors. The contractor hires fishermen for harvesting. This provides insecure work for a short period for the fishing community. The result has been that the young among the fishing community seek other forms of employment, often migrating out of their traditional localities.

BIBHA KUMARI

The Boring Road Crossing fish market in Patna, India. The number of women fish vendors has declined substantially

The daily demand for fish in Patna is 28,000 metric tonnes. With the decline in inland fishing on the Ganga, fish is brought into the city either from other regions within the state or from other states. Patna has its traditional wholesale market areas. From there, the fish goes into retail markets. Generally, the wholesale markets system has been run by men, while women have traditionally participated in retail fish vending—an activity they have relied on for a stable livelihood. However, over the past two decades, the proportion of women fish vendors has declined substantially. The basic reason for this state of affairs is the decline in fish catch, which, in turn, has increased the pressure on those dependent on retail fishing trade.

The government of Bihar and the municipal authorities of Patna have earmarked a certain area for the selling of fish and also tried to regulate fish trade in the city. However, the measures are inadequate and have failed to address the issues of marketplace safety and hygiene. The lack of a properly demarcated area and of security, safety and proper sanitation, make it difficult for women to access these fish markets. The women are also afraid of harassment by administrative authorities and local people. Some women fish vendors have taken recourse to selling fish from door to door. Others have started roadside or neighbourhood fish sales.

This type of vending, outside delineated market areas, is illegal. It brings women face to face with demands for extortion and bribes. Women often have to depend on their menfolk to deal with these illegal systems, thus perpetuating their dependence on the men.

The role of the government in safeguarding both fishing and the access of women to traditional fishing vending operations, is important in the context of creating livelihood opportunities and empowering women in traditional fishing communities. Government intervention can help provide women safe and stable access to fish markets; it can promote hygienic conditions in these markets; and finally, it can make alternative livelihood options available through promoting culture fishing to compensate for the drop in capture fishing from the Ganga.

A Right to Fish, a Fight to Live

In the Sundarbans forest in the east coast of India, women canoe fishers organize themselves to secure their constitutionally-protected right to survival and livelihood

By **Urvashi Sarkar** (urvashisarkar@gmail.com), journalist, and researcher with South Solidarity Initiative

A tall and lean fisherwoman with a strong face stares at the evening sun fading into the still waters running through Kultali, an island in the Sunderbans forest; Anima Mandal is angry. She hasn't eaten since morning.

She was there for a meeting that the Kultali Forest Range beat officer had fixed for 2 pm on February 14, 2015 at the forest range compound in a corner of Kultali, across a river. Nearly 50 women, and a few men, had turned up for this crucial meeting to make two pressing demands—the return of their confiscated fishing canoes (*dongas*) and for the women to be recognized as traditional small-scale fishworkers, with a right to fish for their livelihood.

The women, organized under the Kultali Mahila Donga Matsyajibi Samity [Kultali Women Canoe Fishers' Association], had travelled a long way from Madhya Gurguria village—on foot, on cycles fitted with wooden planks and by boat—to make it to their appointment.

It is already past 5 pm. A number of women begin tracing their steps back towards a dinghy headed homeward: some hurry back to feed and care for the children they've left at home and others return home for fear of husbands who could turn violent. Anima and a few others choose to stay back at Kultali and represent the group, determined to get a response from the Forest Department. They walk around the compound, to the edge of a murky green pond, where their confiscated canoes of palm trunk lie stacked. The women are appalled; debris and wood bits from the canoes have started to peel off and mingle with the water. "Our canoes have been broken into pieces and thrown into the water. There must be lakhs of rupees (floating) in this river," says Geeta Sahu, a fisherwoman speaking softly. Her indignation, however, is unmistakable, shared by the workers standing beside her, still waiting.

PRADIP CHATTERJEE

Women of the *Mahila Donga Samity* and members of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum* in front of Kultali Forest Range beat office, West Bengal, India

The conversation among the waiting crowd turns to input costs: the cost of palm trunks from which the canoes are dug out, the labour cost for chiselling, and the cost for coal-tar coating maintenance, all amounting to about Rs 5,000 (USD 80). Almost every confiscation necessitates this extra expenditure on their part, to build a canoe from scratch. "It can take at least two or three months to gather such a sum. Wooden boats, permitted by the Forest Department, are too expensive to afford," explains Beena Bag, one of the fisherwomen. They walk down some distance and spot a couple of confiscated *dinghies*, still sturdy, poking out through a mass of trees. The canoes and *dinghies* are the fishworkers' only means to catch crab and fish, their sole means to earn a living. By now Anima is fuming: "Why confiscate the canoes and hurt us in the stomach? We don't earn salaries, you know. This is not Calcutta city, where each month people earn something to be deposited in the bank. Nobody is going to hand me a bag of vegetables to cook. Life is different here."

Indeed, life is starkly different in the Sunderbans. For Anima, and other fisherwomen like her, the day begins at 3 am. After housework, they take their canoes into the rivers. To make a catch, they wade into cold, chest-level water. Once they have caught the fish, they return home to cook and feed their children. Crab and fish depots are the next stop. The women come here to sell their catch with hope and no guarantees to make a little money. On days there are earnings, they are funneled into immediate household expenses, fishing input costs (if any), and

savings for the less fortunate days in the week. Many of the communities here are landless second or third generation fishworkers, entirely dependent on fishing for their survival. And so, what they earn will determine what they buy at the market.

Anima was 10 or 12 when she got married. She recently lost her husband to a stroke. "There is no decent hospital here. Even pregnant women need to travel for two hours to Joynagar, where there are hospitals," she exclaims, frustrated. The number of men in the Sunderbans has declined over time, mainly due to migration for better livelihoods; most move to cities as construction workers or get involved in tiger killings for the profit.

The women are also bitter about having no stake in the proposed tourism projects in the Sunderbans. "Why won't they involve us in the tourism projects? It will give us better jobs and a better quality of life. Nobody seems to wants to engage with us. For instance, the big boats catch fish and crab just like we do, but it is us that the Forest Department goes after."

If life is not hard enough, the Forest Department's confiscation of their canoes has ensured that it becomes even harder. The reason cited is that since the canoes do not have a boat license certificate (BLC), granted by the Forest Department, they are therefore not authorised to ply in the Sunderbans; Kultali is part of Sunderbans reserve forest area, preventing the fishworkers from catching crab on their own land, unless they have a BLC.

The BLC regime has several problems including a non-transferable nature, the possession of BLCs by those who are no longer fishworkers, a thriving black market, and the non-issuance of fresh licenses. ICSF study, *Report: Fishing Community Issues in the Sundarbans' Tiger Reserve* outlines these problems in detail (http://mpa.icsf.net/images/stories/mpa/report_2march_kg.pdf). To deter fishworkers, the Forest Department uses methods such as seizing fishing nets; the women complained of receiving threats that glass bits would be mixed into with the riverbank sand, to prevent them from going (as they walk barefoot) to fish.

"The denial of the community rights of the forest dependent fisherwomen to fish in the forest waters is a violation of the FRA," says Pradip Chatterjee, President of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum*. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) is meant to secure the access rights of forest-dwelling people, including sustainable use and conservation of the biodiversity of their home grounds.

He notes that despite repeated calls, the West Bengal government is yet to notify the FRA in the North and South 24 Parganas Districts: "The failure to notify the Act has resulted in the denial of livelihood rights to forest-dependent people including fishers, wild honey collectors, drywood collectors, and shell collectors (among others), leading to consequent conflicts with the Forest Department." Implementing the FRA would allow fishworkers to catch crab without BLCs.

The beat officer enters the scene a little past 6 pm. He speaks with the women of the *Mahila Donga Samity* and members of the *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum* in front of Kultali forest range beat office. The officer states that the canoes have been confiscated because of their alleged use for poaching. Episodes of poaching involving canoes have been sporadic, the women argue, the entire fishing community should not be penalised.

They promise to act as informers for the Forest Department during instances of poaching, but insist on their right to continue using canoes for fishing. The beat officer agrees not to seize canoes for the next three months, during which time the movements of the canoes will be supervised. He also agrees to take up the issue of the rights of forest-dependent fisher communities with higher authorities.

When he voices a grouse about the government having to pay compensation when there are deaths caused by fishworkers venturing into tiger territory, he is reminded that fishworkers do not voluntarily venture into tiger territory, but because it is a question of their livelihood.

By the time discussions conclude, night has already set in. The women are happy to have this victory, even if temporary. They pile into a dinghy that takes them into the dark waters of the Sunderbans. Anima gazes at the still waters and towards home.

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Empty boats, loaded trucks

Rapid changes in fish marketing in a small village in Kerala, India, highlight complex market dynamics and throw up difficult questions

By **Nalini Nayak** (nalini.nayak@gmail.com), Member, ICSF

A few days ago I visited the fishing village of Pallam in the southern coast of Trivandrum, India. This is a densely populated fishing area. Women fish vendors in the SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Union had told me that they were facing harassment from the fish agents and were being badly abused. They also said that in some areas, these agents had been banned because they bring in bad fish. Initially I was confused because I did not understand why agents in Pallam were bringing in fish. On enquiring, they told me, 'Oh, you have not come to the shore for long and that is why you do not see the hundreds of trucks that come in every morning with fish from all over the country." I had seen a couple of trucks on some occasions when I passed the coast, but I had not seen any substantial number. So I decided to go one early morning and it was indeed a surprise. It was a day when there was a hurricane on the east coast and so the trucks from that area had not come in, but yet there were quite a number and the shore was as busy as ever. Hundreds of women fish vendors buying fish, sorting it, repacking it and taking off in auto-rickshaws (three-wheeled vehicles) to the market.

NALINI NAYAK

Insulated vans bringing iced and frozen fish to the sea shore in Pallam, Kerala, India

The women told me that this had been going on for the last four or five years and the number of trucks coming in had gradually increased in numbers. There were women from all the neighbouring villages who had come to buy fish there. This was not an unusually bad time for fishing—the end of the monsoon, but yet, the fishing boats that were coming in did not have much of a catch and hence, did not have much to sell. Moreover, what they did bring home—good fresh mackerel—the women did not want to buy. The auctions were commencing at rates they did not think would be profitable to buy at. I saw an auctioneer try six times to restart the auction, always bringing down the price, and still there were no takers. I do not know what price he finally sold his fish at because women were just turning away and the auctioneer knew that the fisher would be at a huge loss if he sold any lower.

We had seen a similar situation in the wholesale market, when fish caught by the larger trawlers and other crafts was brought in from the big landing centres, and the women vendors purchased for retail sales. But a wholesale market of this kind right there in the fishing village was a more recent phenomenon, and very disturbing for the following reasons.

The fish brought in plastic crates looked extremely old. It was packed with ice which, according to some merchants, had been treated with ammonia, so the fish was semi-frozen. The women examined the fish in the crates and then bid for a crate at a time. Then they settled down with their crates, repacked the fish in their containers, again adding ice and salt. In a small container they also carried some sea sand, to sprinkle on the fish before selling to give the impression of fresh fish from the shore.

Along with the crates, there were also cartons of frozen fish. The label on the carton said reef cod but bore no date or country name. The fish inside was like stone and the women who bought it told me they would take it to their village and salt and dry it. When I spoke to the truck driver, I was told that this fish was brought from the cold storage of the Cochin harbor. This brought back memories of women at the Accra harbor in Ghana buying fish in cartons from the cold storages, where the European fishing fleet had sold the fish that they had fished off the west African coast back to the African women. These women too had no more fish on their shores,

and took the frozen fish to their villages to smoke and preserve. I did not think I would see this in our fishing village, at least in my life time. But things have changed rapidly.

There were a couple of other striking features on the shore. I was surprised to see the number of younger women with books and pens, writing down the accounts of the auction. These literate local women were a new layer of people involved in the marketing chain. Earlier the auctioning agents themselves kept these accounts and claimed the money from the women buyers. Now it was the younger women who heckled the women buyers to return their dues. These women were paid a daily wage which was quite substantial. But the man who actually auctioned the fish seemed the villain in the chain. In addition to a percentage of the sales price, he also kept a portion of fish after the auction was settled. This was a loss to the woman who actually bought the fish, and she had no way of controlling this.

The other new phenomenon was the number of women who worked as head loaders. Women now found employment to unload fish from the boats, and also from the trucks. This was well paid wage work, payment being both on a piece-rate and on a daily-wage basis. The stronger women who did not want to leave the village to sell fish took to this work. Wage work in the community was now an established phenomenon for women in fishing, and all this work continued to be unrecognized and unrewarded.

The women vendors who are members of the SEWA union were ambiguous about what they thought of this phenomenon. On the one hand, they felt this was a reality that they could not wish away. There was not enough fish being caught on their shores, and therefore the incoming trucks helped them access fish from other shores. They could thus continue to eke a livelihood through fish trade. On the other hand, this brought down the value of the catches of their own fishermen who landed fish on their shores. The fresh fish had to compete with fish from trucks. Moreover, there was no control over the quality of the fish the trucks brought in.

The women were angry with the men agents who spoke to them roughly, often using vulgar language. They resented the practice of the auctioneer taking away a part of the fish as his share. They would rather pay a fixed percentage of the total auction value, but not this unregulated payment in kind.

According to the merchant who had started this market, "This is all about markets—fish has to move from the shore to the consumer. In this process hundreds of people can make a living. So isn't this a good system? When I see that very little fish is being landed in Pallam, I call my agents and tell them to divert the trucks with fish this side, and they come. Or when there is too much fish landing here, I ask the agents to come and buy from here for other markets. The price is determined by the availability and the demand in the market and the fisherman is the winner in the long run". This merchant said that when he started this market in Pallam eight years ago, there were only twelve boats catching fish in this village.

Now there were over a hundred. Similarly, there used to be just a few women from the village purchasing the fish, but now there were hundreds. There were 17 teams of merchants—each with its own labour chain. There were also teams of ice suppliers with their own chain of labourers. As he explained, "Look at the employment we have generated, and we are all local people. We contribute to the local economy, and to the Church whom we pay two percent of the income. So the Church has managed to also build a community hall and other services for the community. We have a Merchants' Association and we control the quality of fish that comes into the village and we are sure it is not bad fish." However, he was unaware of where the frozen reef cod in cartons came from.

So while the merchant was right in saying that the fish market looked alive and a large number of people had gained employment, the gains from the process were certainly not equitable. Justobserving the various players, and their housing and other facilities, the class differentiation among them was clearly visible. The major gains went to the large merchants, and the Church had also substantially grown in size and stature. The others were merely surviving.

Fighting for space

Efforts to form a union of women in small-scale fish vending in Gujarat, India, promise to go a long way in addressing the problems of lack of space and facilities that these women face

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

When you first met Hansaben and Shailesh, the two young and cheerful community organisers from the coastal town of Veraval in Gujarat, India, appear to be simple and shy. They have been part of an organization called Jan Jagruti Manch (People's Awareness Forum) since they were adolescents, and have witnessed their families fight against powerful influential leaders of the *Kharava caste panchayat* (fishing communities' traditional institution). In continuing this struggle against existing traditional systems, they are trying to organize small-scale fishers. Hansaben is at the forefront in organizing women vendors and women fish processors employed in fish processing plants at Veraval. The National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), and Program for Social Action (PSA) have all supported these efforts, with inputs from International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

Our meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night. Many of them had returned from fish processing work, had their bath and finished their house work before rushing to the meeting. In earlier meetings, Hansaben had tried to teach the women how to sign their names. But the women had become suspicious of this activity, and some women had stopped attending meetings. Even so, 60 women gathered for this meeting and shared their experiences. They were all resident of Beria in Veraval, from the traditional *Kharava* community. Almost half the women gathered worked in fish processing plants. They explained that although they did not face the same problems that migrant fish workers face, they were concerned about low wages, job insecurity, the absence of social security measures like provident fund and health insurance, and about workplace safety and working conditions, including lack of protective gear like gloves and gumboots. Some expressed fears over forming a union, as employers were bound to retaliate against such efforts. An NFF representative at the meeting shared experiences of organizing trade unions for women in the south Indian state of Kerala, and talked about the benefits of such efforts. The women appeared to appreciate the importance of unions and expressed a desire to form a trade union of their own.

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE

Hansaben with women fishworkers attending meeting at Veraval, Gujarat, India. Meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night

Over the days that followed, Hansaben accompanied me on visits to fish markets in Veraval and Porbandar. There are two main fish markets in Veraval. Fisher's Colony Market is the oldest. A new fish market at Bheria is getting built at the original market site, so currently vendors sit in a nearby area. They have been waiting for the past two years for the new market to be constructed, sitting out in the sun, and watching both their fish stock and their health deteriorate. The market is for both wholesale and retail fish trade. Women generally get fish from wholesalers in the market in the morning, and sell their stock through the day. Many women could be seen standing with small buckets of fish for sale. Hansaben said that the local Corporation (local body) had not consulted the nearly 300 vendors while planning for a new market. As the women were not organized, they were not able to follow up with the Corporation's plans or time frame to finish construction of the market.

A visit to another market in Bheria revealed the same situation for women vendors. Here the women did not even have a demarcated market space to call their own. They were vending in the streets for the last 15 years. There were presently 200 vendors, and for a few hours in the evening, the whole street was flooded with vendors and customers. Older vendors had, over the years, made temporary structures with fish baskets,

thermocol boxes and wooden planks to display their fish, while new vendors stood around the plastic baskets in which their fish was kept. A senior vendor we talked with raised concerns over the recent growth in the number of vendors, due to which older vendors were losing both customers and work. She also feared that the Corporation planned to shift vendors to another area altogether. Most of the women were young, and there were even some children among them, trying to sell a few crabs.

The next day Hansaben and I went to Porbander, another coastal town in Gujarat and the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. We visited the wholesale fish market in the morning and the retail market in the afternoon. Earlier this was a single market where wholesale and retail fish trade carried on side by side. After the Porbander Corporation built a new fish market at a distance from the original market site, wholesalers chose to auction their stock on the busy streets that were easier to access. As is the case of small-scale fish vending across Gujarat, fish was stocked on the sides of the streets, without ice and under the scorching sun. The crowd of vendors and customers in the narrow streets made it difficult for people to walk. Accidents were common in this market. The market was said to be controlled by a woman with the reputation of being a '*gunda*' (antisocial element) who exercised every possible means to maintain her control. The women here would not even to dare to speak of organizing.

The retail fish market was a well-built structure with separate *galas* (sections) for each vendor. The vendors however chose to sit on the ground in the open areas under the scorching sun, atop their usual thermocol boxes and wooden planks. They said that the space they had been given was too small to accommodate their wares. They were also angry that the Municipal Corporation had shifted them from their original space to this new fish market. There were far fewer customers coming to this market. In protest, they have been refusingto pay taxes to the Municipal Corporation. Life is hard for these women whether in fish processing industries or in fish markets. People like Hansaben and Shailesh are trying to organise them into a trade union. A collective union forum will no doubt help them in being able to negotiate with the local Municipal Corporations and Fisheries Departments to gain more control over their livelihood.

Life is hard for these women whether in fish processing industries or in fish markets.

A question of identity

For the first time ever, the Indian State of Tamil Nadu will issue identity cards to women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar, in recognition of the unique nature of their work

By **Sumana Narayanan** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Associate, ICSF

Women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu will soon get State-issued identity cards, which they hope will recognize the unique nature of their work. The recognition will also perhaps enable them to access welfare schemes targeting fishers who go to sea. They also hope that the identity cards would ease their troubles with the forest department.

The Gulf of Mannar, a shallow bay off the east coast of India, is a no-take zone (a national park under India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972). The protected area consists of a 560-sq km area that includes 21 islands. Seaweeds grow abundantly in the shallow waters around the islands and while collection of seaweed is not banned, entry, let alone collection of resources, is banned in and around the islands. The women therefore run the risk of running afoul of the State forest department.

In 2013, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), with support from the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project, conducted training programmes for the fishing communities of the Gulf of Mannar with a view to developing a community-led management plan for the marine resources of the Gulf, using an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM). BOBLME is a project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), involving the Bay of Bengal countries (India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand), that aims to have a coordinated regional plan for fisheries and environment management. At the training programmes, the women seaweed collectors had intense discussions to zero in on some potential measures they could implement, as well as several issues on which they wished to ask for the State's support. Towards this, a meeting with State government officials was organized under the aegis of the State Planning Commission.

At the meeting on June 11, 2014, fishing community representatives from the Gulf of Mannar had an opportunity to share their current initiatives and ideas for sustainable use of the area's marine resources. The meeting was attended by officials from the forest and fisheries departments, the State Planning Commission, the planning, development and special initiatives department, and researchers.

The women seaweed collectors spoke of how they have restricted their seaweed

VENUGOPALAN / ICSF

Seaweed collectors in Gulf of Mannar, Tamil Nadu, India. The Government of Tamil Nadu will soon provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors, recognizing this unique group of women fishers

collection to twelve days per month—six days around the new moon period and six days around the full moon time—from an earlier situation of no controls over collection. In 2006, they developed this practice, after discussions with the State forest department and researchers, because they felt the seaweed harvesting was going beyond sustainable limits. The number of collectors had increased and the seaweeds were not getting time to regenerate. The women had also resolved not to use metal scrapers to collect the seaweed as they damaged the coral substrate. Instead, the women switched to using their hands to collect the seaweed. However, to protect their fingers from the sharp corals, they tied rags around them. In addition, they pointed out, they follow a 45-day ban on seaweed collection; this year (2014), the ban period extended to over two months. The women wanted compensation for this period, noting that the men are compensated. The women also requested the State to organize insurance for them as they too go out to sea.

The women also highlighted the fact that the islands are important to the fishers as a place of refuge during inclement weather and to repair boats when out at sea. The women said they were willing to work with the forest and fisheries departments to conserve resources. They (the fishing community) understand the need for conservation measures as they are dependent on the very same resources for their life and livelihood and want, therefore, to ensure that future generations of fishers are not left bereft. The women also refuted the allegation that they destroyed live corals; noting that seaweed grow on dead corals and therefore the women do not go near the live corals. Neither do the fishing boats break corals as alleged. As one woman asked, if our boat hits corals, the boat would be damaged so why would we deliberately go over corals? Instead, fishers use the deep channels that are free of corals to approach the islands.

During the discussions, the fisheries department noted that it issues identity cards only to fishermen as they go out to sea to fish, and since women focus on post-harvest activities on land, they are not included in this scheme. It argued that welfare schemes are based on families; hence, the women are also covered under the schemes. Responding to the women's demand for compensation for loss of work during the ban period, equivalent to what fishermen were awarded, the department argued that the compensation given to the fishermen was for the family, and not for the fishermen, as individuals. The gender implications of this compensation policy, apparently based on the assumption that men are the traditional head of the family and women are only their dependents, were not, however, discussed.

At the end of the day, it was agreed that the Tamil Nadu State would recognise Gulf of Mannar seaweed collectors as a unique group of women fishers. It would also, for the first time, provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors via the fisheries department. The possibility of providing protective equipment, such as gloves for the women collectors and the use of scissors/cutters to harvest seaweed, would be considered. Finally, it was agreed that the State would also explore the possibility of seaweed collection from deeper waters (6 to 7m), and then provide the women with the required training for diving as well as gear such as oxygen tanks.

Mapping markets in Mumbai

By actively participating in the mapping of the city's fish markets, Mumbai's fish vendors take an important step towards having a greater say in the development of the city

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

On the western coast of India, Greater Mumbai, with an estimated population of 12.5 million, is home to the women's wing of the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS), a local state union of fishworkers. Recently, MMKS Women's Wing, which has been struggling for women fish vendors' rights, took an important first step towards having a greater say in the city's development by getting the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) to agree to a joint exercise of mapping the city's fish markets.

Mumbai has 60 municipal fish markets and any number of informal ones. Informal fish markets include street fish markets as well as privately owned fish markets. Apart from these, Mumbai's *koliwadas* (urban fishing villages) also have landing centres, auction halls and retail markets. The development of these fish markets, of urban fishing villages and of infrastructure related to transport and other activities falls under the purview of the MCGM. Currently, the MCGM is drafting the development plan for the period 2014 to 2034.

As part of this process, the MCGM, after preparing a land use plan, called for public consultations based on twelve different themes including land use, transportation, environmental sustainability, formal housing and public amenities, education and gender. This was jointly done with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure public participation. The MMKS Women's Wing was also involved with this exercise. They brought to the discussion issues of the women fish vendors operating in fish markets and landing centres, in particular the need for land and amenities for their activities.

SHUDDHAWATI S PEKE

In the Byculla Gujari private market the owners have stopped providing basic amenities. Vendors have no security for either their fish, or themselves

According to MCGM data, there are 60 municipal fish markets in Greater Mumbai but, up until this particular survey exercise, there was no data on informal fish markets in the city. Not surprisingly, there was also no initiative until recently from the government to provide basic amenities to informal vendors. Now however, the National Policy on Street Vendors (2009) makes mandatory the protection of street vendors and hawkers by formulating town vending committees, registering hawkers and giving them identity cards, and delineating markets or hawker's zones. At the request of the MCGM, the women's wing of the MMKS in coordination with MCGM and local fish vendors in a month mapped all the formal and informal fish markets in the city.

The survey found that while Mumbai city has formal markets, suburban areas are covered largely by informal markets. There are 30 formal markets in Mumbai city while there are 22 in western suburbs and only twelve in eastern suburbs. The suburbs are largely covered by unstructured and semi structured or fully structured informal markets, located or built on government land and funded from discretionary funds of local government representatives.

A number of development issues were revealed by the survey. Commercial activities including large corporate markets had displaced a number of old fish markets. In the case of the Babulnath Municipal Market, a big business house received sanction to set up a shopping complex due to which 20 women fish vendors were displaced. At the Habib private fish market, the owner evacuated fish vendors systematically by cutting off the electricity and water supply, and now for the past 15 years the place provides poor housing to migrants in the city. In the Byculla Gujari private market and the Chira Bazaar private market the owners have stopped providing basic amenities, and are waiting for fish vendors to leave to give the land over for commercial development.

Municipal markets provide formalised built structures and tax the vendors on their premises. However, in many cases fish markets are pushed to a corner with poor amenities and unhygienic conditions. Vendors have no security for either their fish, or themselves. Street fish markets have another set of issues including absence of regulation and security.

In Mumbai, there are three routes to the development of urban market areas: through government funding; through Public Private Partnership (PPP); and self development. Wholly government funded projects are extremely rare. Government agencies prefer to develop up-market projects. While the PPP model is supposed to be inclusive, builders and private developers attempt to corner premium space for their commercial activities. Often residential complexes are built by the private developers on space allotted to fish markets in the development area, leading to clashes between residents and fish market users. Activists working with women therefore recommend self development as this ensures maximum benefit to vendors and gives control over their land and land use. They are not faced with the constant threat of commercial and semi-commercial developments under the PPP model that coexist with their establishments, and gradually bring pressure on the fish vendors to move out for various purported reasons like public nuisance and hygiene. In the year ahead, the task for MMKS is to use the learning from the mapping survey to advocate for transparent and inclusive process of market development.

This mapping process has achieved many important things. Formal fish markets, and for the first time even informal markets, got documented officially by the city corporation. Photographic documentation has been created, which will be an important reference source and evidence for fish vendors to fight for their rights in the face of future developmental activities. The next step in the exercise is circulating a questionnaire developed in collaboration with market department of MCGM to get detailed information on fish markets. A comprehensive report including the survey and the questionnaire data will then be submitted to the MCGM. The MCGM Commissioner has promised to call for a meeting, based on the report of fish vendor representatives, to settle fish market issues one by one. Over the next two decades, the city is looking at large developmental projects and expansion activities that will change its urban landscape. Informal establishments will face increasing problems to safeguard user rights and access basic amenities.

Co-operation is the solution

A visit to SEWA, India's oldest and largest women's co-operative movement, spanning diverse sectors from vending and retail to banking and insurance, turns out to be an eye-opener for Mumbai's women fishworkers

By **Shuddhawati S Peke** (shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

For generations, women fishworkers in the state of Maharashtra in India's western coast have sold fish. Mumbai,the capital of Maharashtra and India's economic capital, has 53 municipal fish markets and approximately 70 street fish markets; in addition, countless vendors move door to door throughout the city and its suburbs selling fish. According to the 2010 marine census, the state has the largest number of women fishworkers in India. Today, for the first time, these women are getting organized.

Mumbai's women fishworkers have historically been part of a larger fishworkers' union, the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samittee (MMKS), affiliated to the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) but their issues have never been centrally represented by the union. To correct this serious imbalance, Mumbai's women fishworkers have today decided to build their own organization—a space where their concerns may be voiced, and properly represented in the policies and decision making process for governing the fisheries sector.

To catalyze the organizing process, Nalini Nayak, a member of ICSF and one of the founder members of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in the state of Kerala, suggested an exposure visit to SEWA in Ahmedabad in the neighbouring Gujarat state. SEWA is the oldest and largest women's union in the labour history of India. Born out of a historic struggle in 1972 by Ahmedabad's women textile mill workers, under the leadership of Elaben Bhatt, a Gandhian activist and woman lawyer, SEWA today spans 14 states and has a membership of over 10,00,000 self-employed women. Its main objective is to bring visibility to women workers in the informal sector. The organization pursues a two-pronged strategy of struggle and constructive work, organizing self-employed women in unions and co-operatives.

A team of seven, comprising three women from MMKS, Mumbai, the author representing ICSF from Mumbai, and three individuals from Gujarat, visited SEWA in September 2013. The four-day trip was spent visiting co-operatives of self-employed women in a range of sectors: insurance, banking, health,

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE / ICSF

SEWA has offered a composite insurance product known as VimoSEWA (meaning SEWA insurance) for members and their families.
Annual general meeting of members of VimoSEWA

dairy, fisheries, agriculture (both production and vending), catering, cleaning, vegetable vending, health, training as well as services such as child care.

On the first day, the team was invited to attend the fourth Annual General Body meeting of VimoSEWA, a first of its kind national insurance co-operative that emerged out of the need for social security for women in the informal economy. While earlier SEWA relied on insurance for its members through the government's Life Insurance Corporation, in 2009, VimoSEWA was formed to provide micro-insurance to poor self-employed women and their families. The meeting highlighted the difficulties of getting women with meagre incomes to accept the importance of insurance and pay premiums regularly. A woman from the local area, referred as the *veemasathi,* helps educate women on insurance and helps with claims and reimbursements. Out of the 4420 claims VimoSEWA settled in 2012, only 15 per cent were rejected. The insurance portfolio covers a range of options ranging from Rs 3000 (USD 49) to Rs 25000 (USD 409.5) of insurance cover for life, health, accidental death or housing damage depending on premium and tenure. Several large insurance companies, such as the Life Insurance Corporation and Larsen and Toubro, with whom VimoSEWA has tied up for insurance provisioning, were present at the Annual General Body, and it was well said by Miraiben, Chairperson of VimoSEWA, that "when we have strength these companies reach out to vulnerable groups like ours; our collective strength, lies in our power to negotiate."

In a patriarchal society like India, an all-women operation is a challenge to the status quo.

The next halt for the team was a fish market. Chamanpura Fish Market, one of the city's three such markets, sells mostly inland fish. SEWA, along with women fishworkers in Ahmedabad, struggled hard to acquire corporation land for the fish market. Earlier women vendors would vend their fish on the roadside. Now they have a place under the bridge, for which they pay a small rent to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The fish vendors have their own co-operative named Shree Matsygandha Womens' SEWA Co-operative Society Limited. It provides place to store unsold fish, a weighing scale and office space.

Suruchiben, a worker from SEWA, who works with women engaged in fishing and agriculture, introduced the visitors to SEWA's basic model. Once a woman gets attached to a co-operative related to her business or to a SEWA union, she automatically gets connected with SEWA's other services. These include insurance through VimoSEWA, and credit, saving and investment through the SEWA bank. She also gets attached to the co-operative federation at the state level, and through it, can avail of capacity building and other training services from time to time. A grassroots worker from SEWA helps each group of women workers to come together and learn 'how to do' their business through co-operation—how to register a co-operative, connect to the rest of SEWA and develop leadership.

The next day, the team headed off to Vekeraia gam in Nal Sarovar—a region famous for a huge lake, marshlands and for bird sanctuary. The fisherfolk here—mostly Muslims—besides fishing, act as tourist guides. While men in the area handle both fishing and marketing, a women's fisheries co-operative helped them build a network with inland markets. Though the co-operative members are women, the management is by men, chosen by union workers from each village. Women help prepare for fishing trips, manage household chores, and participate in the co-operative. The co-operative leaders buy the fish catch for the day and transport it to the collection office in Ahmedabad from where it gets distributed to markets like Chamanpura. Unlike in Mumbai where women fishworkers have to go to landing centres to buy fish, women vendors in Chamanpura place orders that are then sent to their market.

Next the team visited a co-operative of agricultural women workers. SEWA helped this co-operative lease barren land from the government for a period of 20 years, arranging for training through agricultural institutions. The once-barren area is today an organic farm. Its produce, consisting of fruits and vegetables, is transported to the city by van and fetches a premium price. An additional attraction offered is ecotourism—the co-operative organizes pickup facilities from the city, and tourists are treated to nutritious food, sight-seeing, and a traditional reception and send-off.

While the co-operative was subjected to ridicule from the *panchayat* (village-level governing body) and difficulties such as the presence of wild animals on the farm, they

gained strength from SEWA's constant support. And as the farmland became productive, there were attempts to snatch the land away from them, which again SEWA helped them resist.

A similar story may be heard in Pethapur, where, in a male dominated world of milk marketing, SEWA runs its milk co-operative. The milk that women bring in is measured for quantity and fat content. All transactions are maintained on both computer and physical register. The book keeping is orderly and easily accessible to the members. The women, some only semi-literate, successfully handle the computer. In a patriarchal society like India, an all-women operation is a challenge to the status quo and SEWA has had to struggle at every step.

The team also visited the Agriculture Producer's Marketing Committee (APMC) Market, a wholesale vegetable market, started by two women who dared to enter the wholesale field, until then completely controlled by men. Despite initial opposition and derision, today they run a shop managed by SEWA which provides vegetables to retail women vendors in the area. SEWA has in fact built a network of successful agricultural co-operatives for poor women in a context where agricultural co-operatives are generally controlled by big farmers and traders.

The SEWA Bank is another unique initiative started in 1974 by Elaben Bhatt promoting saving among poor women, and providing credit, insurance coverage and pension schemes. With seven branches today in predominantly working class localities in Ahmedabad, it was started by 4000 women, each contributing ten rupees (USD 0.16). Currently, it has 96,921 shareholdersand 448,434 members. Savings, loan and investment products are developed according to life cycle needs of women. It offers a scheme called "Kishori Gold" to provide for a daughter's marriage; a scheme for housing loans; and for micro pension schemes. The bank also has "bank *sathis*" (bank volunteers), financial literacy programmes and business counselling cells to handhold women in their journey towards financial self dependence.

SEWA is a strong force in the labour movement in India today. Many government policies have been influenced by its advocacy efforts—the formulation of the national street vendor's policy; and the reduction in general bank interest rates for women co-operatives from 9 to 16 per cent to 4 per cent are examples.

The visit to SEWA was a source of inspiration to us. For women fish vendors back home in Mumbai, keen to build a strong union, and struggling with government bodies and mainstream fisheries, there is still long way to go. We need strong women's co-operatives (because until now fisheries co-operatives have only served the needs of fishermen), better social security, access to credit and savings. SEWA's splendid results have borne fruit in 40 years. For Mumbai's women fishworkers this is just the beginning of a bright, hopeful future.

A cry from the heart

A play depicting fisherwomen's lives is evoking widespread appreciation in both fishing villages and cities throughout India

By **Renu Ramanath** (renuramanath@hotmail.com), Independent writer

The fish seller's cry echoes throughout the world. It cuts across man-made barriers of language, region, religion and country. It is a cry of livelihood and sustenance, a cry of the marginalized as they are ousted out of existence by the hands that seize power.

The woes of the fishing community have been the subject of many a creative work throughout history, all over the world—in literature, films and theatre, in various forms and genres. In India, the state of Kerala is home to both the celebrated novel, *Chemmeen* of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and its celluloid version which created clichéd images of fisherfolk that continue to be reflected in many later films.

However, the lives of the children of the sea have not found much representation in Kerala's theatre, historically a powerful tool of social emancipation and spreading awareness in the State. The history of using theatre in Kerala as a tool for creating awareness on social maladies and spreading positive messages goes back to the early decades of the 20th century. During those days of radical transformation of the social and political fabric, theatre lent itself easily to the hands of social reformers and political activists as waves of nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment swept throughout the country.

RADHAKRISHNAN

Sajitha Madathil during the performance of *Matsyagandhi*, (The One Who Smells of Fish), a one-act solo play on the travails of women from fishing communities

Matsyagandhi ("The One Who Smells of Fish"), is a one-act solo play on the travails of women from fishing communities. Penned and performed by Sajitha Madathil, a well-known theatre personality from Kerala, the play was the outcome of an international collaborative theatre project, the Theatre for Africa project, that Sajitha was invited to participate in. This was a part of the Earth Summit 2002 held in South Africa and focused on sustainable development in fishing communities. Six actors, including Sajitha, from six continents were invited to be a part of the project. During the nearly six-month duration of the project, the actors first performed for a month the solo performances that each had developed, in the towns of Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town.

After that, the six actors knitted together their solo performances into another play "Guardians of the Deep", which was again performed continuously for three months. "Altogether, it was a very exciting and rewarding theatre project that helped me immensely as an actor," recalls Sajitha, who is currently the Deputy Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama), New Delhi.

Sajitha herself has performed *Matsyagandhi* only five times in India—thrice in Delhi and twice in Kerala. Interestingly, although the play won a lot of appreciation abroad, it did not make many headlines in Kerala when it was first performed.

Recently, however, the script has witnessed a revival, with at least two versions staged in Kerala during the past one year. Last year, Shylaja P Ambu, a Thiruvananthapuram-based performer, presented a series of performances of *Matsyagandhi* in the fishing villages of Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts, drawing wide appreciation, especially from women who were seeing their own lives being represented on stage for the first time. Shylaja recalls how women would come to her after the performance and tell her that they felt the play mirrored their own experiences down to the last detail, including the lack of toilet facilities that put them through untold miseries during their daily grind.

Matsyagandhi is replete with images related to the sea, culled from the everyday lives of fisherfolk. Small wonder since Sajitha evolved the script through a series of conversations

with women from the fishing community. The stench of fish is another recurring image that connects the text to the myth of *Matsyagandhi*, also known as Satyavati, the fishing woman in India's great mythological narrative, the Mahabharata, who was gifted the fragrance of *kasturi* (musk) by the sage who lusted after her.

In fact, Sajitha connects the myth of *Matsyagandhi* with a real-life incident which had acted as the major inspiration for the script—the rape of a woman in a fish market in broad daylight. "When I heard about this incident, I knew I wanted to do a play about her," recalls Sajitha.

The text touches upon, and brings out, the pathos of the fishing community, being smothered by the growing tentacles of corporate bodies slowly swallowing up our shores for commercial exploitation. The protagonist, a middle-aged woman fishmonger, talks of how the slower and quieter life of days gone by had more grace and abundance despite the poverty and the ever-present threat of losing fishermen to the raging sea. But today it is no longer the sea that swallows up the fisherman; rather, it is the mechanized trawler, laments the woman who lost her own husband to a speeding trawler.

The taut and smooth-flowing narrative touches upon almost all the issues that the community faces in contemporary times. The stench of fish is a recurring motif of the play until the very end when the actress, in the final scene, walks into the audience with a lamp and a vessel of fish, rebuking the viewers for their aversion to the smell of fish even as they eagerly await their fish curry.

The play also shows how the lives of fishers are being decimated by sea-walls and boundaries that cut them off from the sea, which they regard as their mother and is their primary source of livelihood.

No wonder the play has found an echo far and wide. After Shylaja P Ambu's performance that toured India's coastal districts and was featured at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, there was another production in the city of Kochi, directed by Ajayan and performed by Mary Grace.

The play has also been performed in other Indian languages too: Hindi, Marathi and Bengali. Often, Sajitha is not even informed about a performance although some directors do seek her prior permission. "I came to hear that a production of *Matsyagandhi* was performed in Chennai but I don't know in what language!" says Sajitha. The play has been included as part of the course curriculum for undergraduate English course in MG University, Kerala. It has also been included in a collection of contemporary Malayalam language plays.

A dialogue begins

An important dialogue between Mumbai's women fish vendors, State officials and researchers on livelihood security is kickstarted by an ICSF study

By **Shuddhawati Peke** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Associate, ICSF

During 2-3 December 2012, women fish vendors, fishworker union representatives, government officials, researchers and others met at a workshop to discuss ICSF's study on women fish vendors in Mumbai, India. Women of fishing communities in Mumbai have traditionally dominated fish vending in the city, and fish markets developed in locations where they customarily sold fish. Nevertheless, over the years, women fish vendors have been facing problems in pursuing their livelihoods. The workshop sought to outline strategies to secure their livelihoods in the changing urban landscape of Mumbai.

Participants on the first day of the two-day workshop held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) included grassroots organizations like the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samittee (MMKS), a trade union, the National Hawkers Federation (NHF), YUVA (a non-governmental organization), women fish vendors, fishworker leaders, and researchers.

The workshop commenced with Ujjwala Patil, the organizer from MMKS, sharing her experiences of working with women vendors in the city and describing the challenges that they face. The ICSF researcher, Shuddhawati Peke, then presented the findings of the study on "Women Fish Vendors in Mumbai". The study had specifically focused on vendors in government-run and private markets, street vendors and door-to-door vendors. Some of the themes running through her discussions with fish vendors, she said, were the lack of basic infrastructure such as clean water and sanitation. Street vendors are exposed to the ever-present threat of eviction. Door-to-door or peripatetic vendors, she said, were especially concerned about access to customers since the growing number of gated communities bar the entry of hawkers. The contentious plan to redevelop markets through private developers, under the private-public partnership (PPP) model, was also brought up.

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE

The participants outlined strategies to secure the livelihoods of women fish vendors in the changing urban landscape of Mumbai

Peke's presentation highlighted the demand by vendors that funds for redevelopment should come from government agencies such as the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) rather than from private developers, whose main interest was to establish their hold over high-value commercial space in whatever manner possible, including by displacing fish vendors from their traditional market spaces. Vendors' demands for better facilities, access to fish, and social security measures were also highlighted.

Raju Bhise of YUVA, who has experience of organizing the urban poor, spoke of the need to recognize fishing communities as indigenous communities in the city, given that they are the original inhabitants of Mumbai. He also spoke of the need to protect their spaces. Bhise emphasized the need for fishing communities to engage with the process around Mumbai's Development Plan (DP), currently underway, to ensure that their settlements, markets, vending spaces and so on are reflected in it, and that provisions are made for the establishment of new markets and other space-related requirements of fishing communities.

Post-lunch, members of the NHF shared their experiences from various States in India. They talked of the initiative of creating hawkers' zones in the city of Bhubaneswar, Odisha, and of incorporating the participation of hawkers in the process. From Mumbai, several women fish vendors spoke of the travails of vending in markets. Usha Tamore of the Mumbai District Women's Co-operative Limited highlighted how traders tamper with the scales, short-changing vendors in the process. There was agreement that such problems need to be solved through careful monitoring by women vendors' associations.

Responding to the problem raised by women fish vendors regarding migrants from other States taking over their spaces, Pankaj Bhave from the fishing community said that

The workshop highlighted the shortcomings of the State in protecting the livelihood needs of women fish vendors and the need for the women to be proactive.

instead of blaming the migrants for muscling in on what was traditionally fisherwomen's business, it is important to learn from them. The migrants work in groups to buy fish, reducing costs, and are thus more competitive. Bhave suggested that the women should consider doing the same. He also expressed concern over the reluctance of co-operatives in the State to market fish locally, though they supply to exporters. Bhave also suggested that the women fish vendors investigate the possibility of selling value-added fish products along with their traditional merchandise of dry and fresh fish.

At the end of the day, the participants compiled the proposals to be shared with the government officials who would be participating in the second day's programme. Key proposals included the following: the establishment of a State policy for street vendors; the provision of better infrastructure and facilities in markets and landing centres; the prioritization of the public sector model over the public-private partnership model for market redevelopment, which, additionally, should not only involve vendors at all stages but also ensure transparency by making all redevelopment plans and proposals accessible online; the granting of licences to all legitimate vendors through a transparent process; and, finally, the development of new fish markets in keeping with the rapid expansion of the city. The suggestion for a new wholesale market also came up along with the demand for social security, capacity building, and training for vendors.

The second day of the workshop began with a recap of the previous day's discussions for the benefit of new participants. The officials from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), responsible for the management of markets, said that while they were unable, at this point, to make any promises, they would share the vendors' concerns and demands with other officials at BMC. They also explained that while conditions at some markets were less than ideal, it was not true of all markets. In some cases, since the government plans to redevelop certain markets, temporary repairs have been halted. Officials from the State Fisheries Department also responded to the proposals of the vendors. They highlighted some of the work underway to improve existing harbours and landing centres in the city. They were requested to ensure that the concerns of the women vendors, like sanitation and access to auction halls and storage space, are addressed in this process. It was pointed out, however, that this does not lie in the hands of the Fisheries Department as harbours fall within the purview of the Bombay Port Trust Authority. The need for women vendors' organizations to make their demands known to the other relevant departments was highlighted. The Fisheries Department was also asked to ensure social-security coverage for women fish vendors and to ensure that they are provided with compensation for the oil spill that took place in 2011, due to which women vendors, for no fault of their own, had to suffer huge losses.

Usha Tamore intervened to raise the issue of eviction of vendors from a market near Pikale Hospital, pointing out that the vendors were being evicted for redevelopment though the market was not under BMC. She added that the women would welcome the redevelopment if the money came from other government bodies such as the NFDB and if the women were given a say over what happens with the extra space created. The women were invited for further discussions on the issues raised with BMC and the Fisheries Department.

While the workshop highlighted the shortcomings of the State in protecting the livelihood needs of women fish vendors, it also brought to light the need for the women to be proactive. Currently, the women are not an organized or cohesive group, making it difficult to ensure that their voices are heard.

On the path to self-reliance

Empowered with the right training and support, women in several coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, India, are turning to farm-feed production as a viable livelihood option

By **B. Shanthi** (drshanthi@ciba.res.in) and **K. Ambasankar**, senior scientists with the Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture, Chennai, India

Aquaculture is one of the fastest-growing food-production systems in the world. A highly viable livelihood option for women, especially those living in coastal areas, it offers high returns and opportunities for livelihood diversification.

In India, 30 per cent of women in rural and coastal areas are directly or indirectly engaged in small-scale fisheries. A third of this population is estimated to be involved in various field activities linked to aquaculture, such as manuring fish ponds, feeding fish, harvesting, transporting and marketing fish, peeling shrimp in fish-processing plants, working in shrimp hatcheries, rearing mud crabs, producing aqua-feed, and preparing, processing and marketing value-added fish and farm products.

A key component of the aquaculture industry is aqua-feed production. The quality of ornamental fish and crabs depends directly upon the quality of the aqua-feed used during production. Today, the increasing global demand for crab has stimulated crab production in several Asian countries. With this, the demand for good-quality aqua-feed is also on the rise. The production of aqua-feed is thus a potentially viable income-generating activity that can be gainfully incorporated into women's empowerment programmes.

B. SHANTHI

Marketing of farm-made aqua-feed produced by coastal women self-help groups is a potentially viable income-generating activity in Tamil Nadu, India

Inspired by this goal, the Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture (CIBA), located in Chennai, India, has, since 2004, been training women's self-help groups (SHGs) in coastal areas to produce farm-made aqua-feed for domestic marketing. Fish-feed manufacturing units, with a productive capacity of 20 kg per hour, designed inhouse at CIBA, were fabricated and installed in the pilot villages of Thonirevu in Tiruvallur district and New Perungulathur in Kancheepuram district. Local SHGs were then trained in various aspects of production, including technology, manufacture, packaging and marketing of the feed. Once farm-feed production got under way, the women began marketing it to aquafarmers in nearby areas and also using it for their own aquafarming activities.

What does the farm-feed production process entail? The important first step is to start with a balanced formulation of aqua-feed. This would include a healthy mix of protein, fat and carbohydrate sources as well as vitamins and minerals. Protein sources might include any marine product, including dry fish, fish waste, acetes, squid waste, squilla, prawn-head waste, snail meal, clam meal and crab meal. Locally available plant protein sources like groundnut oil cake, *gingelly* oil cake, cottonseed cake, sunflower oil cake, soyabean meal and mustard oil cake may also be used. Energy sources might include broken rice, broken wheat, maize, tapioca, sorghum and other millets. Fat sources would include fish oil or cheaply available vegetable oils. Wheat bran and rice bran are also important ingredients for farm-made feeds.

The dry solid raw ingredients are measured, according to the formula, spread in a heap on a platform and thoroughly mixed. The ingredients are then ground in the grinder component of the feed-manufacturing unit. The materials are first coarsely, and then finely, powdered in the hammer mill. The powdered

materials are passed through a sieve into the mixer. At this stage, additives such as binders, minerals and vitamins are added. After five minutes of mixing, liquid ingredients like fish oil and lecithin are added, along with water. The mixing process usually takes ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

The mixed materials are subjected to steam cooking to improve the digestibility of the feed and also to destroy any pathogenic microbes that might be present. The cooked feed materials are then passed through a pelletizer. The pellets that emerge are collected in trays and kept in a dryer at a temperature of 105° C until the moisture level goes below 12 per cent. During the drying process, the pellets are periodically turned to enable uniform drying. Finally, the dried pellets are sieved to remove debris, and weighed, packed and sealed in lined polythene bags. Labels are then stuck on the packets and the product is ready for marketing. Different grades of pellet feeds (starter, grower and finisher) can be manufactured for use as feed for shrimp, fish and crab.

The economics of farm-feed production work out well for the producer. The cost of one farm-feed manufacturing unit of 20-kg-per-hour capacity is approximately Rs400,000 (US$7,273). The manufacturing cost works out to about Rs30 (US$0.55) per kg, and the feed can be stored for a period of up to two months. The relative ease of production, the reasonably good profit margins and the ready availability of marketing opportunities through community networks combine to ensure that the women farm-feed producers trained by CIBA are well on their way to self-sustenance, thus proving that farm-feed production is indeed a viable livelihood option for women in coastal areas.

Pulicat's *Padu* System

Growing resource scarcity in India's Pulicat Lake region is not only putting a strain on the traditional system of fisheries management but also raising vital questions about gender equity in the community

By **Ramya Rajagopalan** (icsf@icsf.net), Consultant, International Collective in Support of Fishworkers

Pulicat Lake, spread across the southern coastal States of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, is the second largest brackishwater lagoon in India, after Chilika Lake. The saline water of the lagoon makes it an important fishing ground, especially for shrimp and mullets. Over 50 fishing villages currently fish in the lagoon area, using stake-nets (*suthu valai*) exclusively for shrimp, and drag-nets (*badi valai*), shaped like shore seines, for all fish species. The predominant fishing community in the area is the Pattanavar community. In the last few years, some *dalit* (people traditionally assigned a low status in the caste hierarchy) community members have also started fishing near the mouth of the lake.

The fishing communities in Pulicat practise the *padu* system—a traditional system of allocating rights to the fishing grounds to eligible fishermen in the lagoon area. This originated with the dominant Pattanavar community but is now being practised by people from other fishing communities in the region as well. The term *padu* means 'fishing site'. The *padu* system follows spatio-temporal regulation—fishermen are allowed access to specific fishing grounds by rotation. This means that all eligible fishers can eventually access all fishing grounds.

RAMYA RAJAGOPALAN/ICSF

Women vendors at the Pulicat fish landing centre, India. Women have no fishing rights, as they are not members of the *talaekattu* system

The system depends on a traditional patriarchal institution at the village level called the '*talaekettu*'. Every male above the age of 18 belonging to the Pattanavar community is eligible to become a member of the *talaekattu* and gain access to the fishing grounds. The membership rights to new members are bestowed by the village elders. The *talaekattu* makes decisions related not only to fishing but also to conflicts and disputes among villagers.

The increase in the demand for shrimp since the 1980s and the growing population of new fishers seeking to access fishing rights in the region are putting a strain on the traditional *padu* system. Moreover, pollutants from industries located in the nearby Ennore port region also damage the health of the fishing ground. In fact, some species have completely disappeared from the lake. As a result, the number of days of fishing allotted to each fisherman has gradually decreased over the years. Currently, the system allows only two days per week for the *suthu valai* fishers and one day for *badi valai* fishers. Once, the *padu* system was sufficient to meet the needs of fishermen who did not have to look at any other form of livelihood—they were expected to fish in their fishing grounds on the prescribed days and could not abstain, without good reason, from fishing. However, the growing pressure on resources has meant that the rules are no longer the same. Today, the rules allow fishermen to leave the fishing village for a year to look for other livelihood options, upon the condition that they diversify out of fishing during the period.

Though the *padu* system has been in practice for generations, it is not officially recognized by the State Government of Tamil Nadu, one of the two States in which Pulicat Lake falls. These communities are also not part of the licensing system of the State fisheries department and so, their customary rights do not enjoy legal protection.

There are two ways of viewing this traditional resource management system. Rajasekharan, a fisherman leader in the region, says: "The *padu* system ensures a harmonious and conflict-free life for everyone in the village

as it implements an equitable distribution of fishing grounds irrespective of the skills of the fishermen. It can also be seen as a resource management initiative." He adds that despite the number of fishing villages in the region increasing from three to 24, the *padu* system has spread to cover the new villages, with each village designating its own *padu* area. The villagers have thus managed to avoid conflicts over resource use.

A very different picture of the *padu* system emerges, however, from Sarojini, a fisherwoman from Pulicat. She says: "Women in these fishing villages are not members of the *talaekattu* and hence have no rights over fishing in the *padu* system. Most women are involved in selling and drying fish that are caught by their husbands. So, in case of households where there are no male children, on the death of the fisherman, the *padu* rights automatically revert back to the system, as the wife or girl child is not entitled to such rights. Women-headed households cannot even hire a labourer on wages to use fishing gear and craft. Most often, the fishing gear and craft are sold." Sarojini explains how the *padu* system discriminates against women even on non-fishing rights. "For drinking water, the village has a lot system of allocating a certain number of pots for each member of the *talaekattu*. However, in the case of families where there are no male members, they are not part of the *talaekattu* system, and hence are not eligible for fair allocation of drinking water. The system also discriminates in the distribution of welfare schemes available as relief at the time of natural disasters. The distribution of such schemes to women-headed households is done only after all other households get their entitlements, and the decision is left in the hands of the *chettiyar* (village head) and other village elders. Women-headed households do not have any rights over land, except for the husband's property. They are not eligible to buy any new property within the village nor are they allowed to sell their existing property in a fair manner. The price of the property and also the decision about whom to sell the property to, are both taken by the village elders."

Traditional community resource management systems, even while addressing issues of equitable resource use and conflict resolution, can embed within themselves a gender bias.

We, therefore, see how traditional community resource management systems, even while addressing issues of equitable resource use and conflict resolution, can embed within themselves a gender bias. However, even as resource constraints are forcing the system to change, women are beginning to find ways of asserting their rights. As Sarojini explains, "Earlier, women-headed households had no access to village funds. But now, with the establishment of self-help groups in these villages, women are coming out and discussing some of their problems. They have started taking part in a few village-level activities. Women were earlier not allowed to work outside the household; it is only recently that they have started working in the markets."