

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, CIFF-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)

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 to her, 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



Nikita Gopal

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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



Jyoti Rajesh Meher

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.

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.

MMKS in Palghar and Mumbai also took up the issue of street



Ujwala Jaykishan Patil

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 coastal. 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.

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