

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



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”.

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