

Linking Up

A workshop on enhancing the capacities of women fishworkers in India for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines led to clear and positive outcomes

Close to 60 women fishworkers from nine coastal states of India met over three days in November 2016 in Chennai, India, to learn about the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) and how it was relevant in their contexts, to understand how existing laws, schemes and provisions are being and can be used, and to develop a holistic framework to life and livelihood in the small-scale fisheries, with a critique on the existing forms of fisheries development.

This national workshop on “Enhancing capacities of women fishworkers in India for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines” was planned as a follow-up to another workshop held in 2010, titled “Enhancing Women’s Roles in Fisheries in India”, organized by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) Trust, which discussed and analyzed the role of women in fisheries, and reflected on issues facing women in fishing communities in India. At the 2010 workshop, ICSF, along with representatives of fishworker organizations and civil society representatives, adopted the Global “Shared Gender Agenda for Sustaining Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities” (<http://wifworkshop.icsf.net/en/page/855-reports.html>). The action plans highlighted in the Shared Gender Agenda were further used for including the gender equality and equity sections of the SSF Guidelines adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in June 2014.

The Chennai workshop was, therefore, proposed as a follow-up to the 2010 workshop, keeping in mind the opportunities presented with the Tenure and SSF Guidelines, changes in the last half decade for women in fisheries in India, the challenges they face in the current context of development and their attempts to overcome these. The workshop also took into account the gendered components of the subregional, regional and national-level consultations/meetings that have been held on the SSF Guidelines in the past couple of years.

The Chennai workshop was, therefore, proposed as a follow-up to the 2010 workshop, keeping in mind the opportunities presented with the Tenure and SSF Guidelines...

Several months prior to the workshop, participants were sent questionnaires regarding the situation of women in small-scale fisheries in their areas, their organization profiles, successful campaigns undertaken as well as their expectations of the workshop. The responses received were collated and informed the workshop content. Material was also collected from state governments, particularly the Fisheries Departments, regarding the schemes they had for small-scale fishworkers, focusing on different aspects of the SSF Guidelines (housing, education, social protection, social security aspects, fish-processing industries, work-in-fishing sector, human rights, discrimination issues, and rural and urban livelihood aspects). Information on legal frameworks that are relevant to

*This article is by **Mariette Correa** (mariettec@gmail.com), Senior Programme Co-ordinator, ICSF*

women in SSF in India, especially on social issues and within a human-rights-based approach was collected. All this material was compiled, translated into the various Indian languages used in the coastal states of India and distributed prior to the workshop.

These discussions drew on lessons and learnings from actions that women have initiated in their areas.

Participants at the workshop were given an overview of the situation of women in fisheries in India. Using national and state-level statistics and development indicators, it was clear that the situation in fishing communities was poor in terms of sex ratio as well access to health, education and housing. The myth that falls in fish catch were responsible for decreasing access of women to fish was dispelled, with national statistics showing how fish catches were actually increasing over the years in marine and inland fisheries and especially in aquaculture. The lack of access of women to fish was mainly the result of increasing exports, most often by large fish merchants from the same communities as the small-scale women vendors. Putting in perspective the weakening situation of women in small-scale fisheries, links were made to other marginalized and vulnerable sections of society, all of whom were facing threats to their lives and livelihoods with the heightening pressure on land and water resources through government policies favouring the powerful, the increasing privatization of resources, and the adverse affects of global warming and climate change.

Much of the workshop was devoted to discussing and highlighting the social dimensions of small-scale fisheries, with participants grouping together to discuss issues of health, education, violence, housing, water and sanitation, social security and human rights as well as access to

resources, markets. These discussions drew on lessons and learnings from actions that women have initiated in their areas. The groups shared their experiences, with facilitators for each session then supplementing the inputs with legal provisions and schemes on those specific topics.

Deploring the lack of facilities in fish markets—like drainage systems, storage systems, infrastructure, drinking water, electrical power and toilets, lack of regulation in the markets, increasing distances to travel to access fish, as well as direct or subtle displacement from markets spaces—participants suggested ways to address these problems. The suggestions included price fixation, co-management, establishment of retail outlets, education of women fishworkers, strengthening of market linkages, lobbying for policy changes, participating actively in the formulation of city development plans, and demanding that customary rights be upheld. Various Acts and schemes could be used to address these issues such as The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, which give street vendors the right against eviction; the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008, which protected rights of unorganized workers; schemes under NABARD, NFDB, NCDC and the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries (DADF), Ministry of Agriculture, which could be used for market development, including development of retail fish markets, assistance to artisanal fishermen, insulated box for ice holding, ice plant or cold storage, and fish outlets.

A focus on rights

At the workshop, the history of struggles to achieve human rights, the importance of customary rights in the Indian context, and the rights granted by the Indian constitution, were contextualized in terms of the SSF Guidelines. Gaps between the rights granted by the Indian constitution and what the SSF Guidelines proposed helped

participants identify areas in which further lobbying was necessary. Rights and opportunities presented by various Acts that could protect women and improve their situation included the Protection of Human Rights Act (1993), the National Food Security Act (2013), The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, and the Right to Information Act (2005).

Access to resources, the workshop participants noted, has been reducing for multiple reasons, with traditional lands and fishing rights taken away from communities, land diverted for industrial and other 'development' projects, urbanization processes divesting people of their traditional spaces for fisheries-related activities, establishment of National Parks and Sanctuaries limiting traditional rights of communities to resources, bureaucratic hurdles to get rights to these areas, mechanization of fishing, and lack of spaces for women in fisheries management discussions.

Demands to improve access to fish were made by various groups. These included giving women rights as first vendors, fishworkers determining the price for fish, banning foreign direct investment (FDI) in retail marketing and fish imports, levying higher taxes on large fishing vessels, the proceeds of which could be used for welfare schemes for, and implemented by, fisherwomen, and enacting a separate law where fishers have customary rights over fishing resources and coastal lands.

The 2002 and 2006 amendments to the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, protected the basic occupational rights and livelihoods of communities traditionally living in National Parks and Sanctuaries, with opportunities for participation in discussions prior to notification of the areas as protected. The Biological Diversity Act of 2002, called for the conservation of resources and the equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilization of these resources. Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, recognize the traditional rights

to forest produce of tribals and forest dwellers who have been living there for generations.

Misuse of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2011, shrinking of spaces for fishing communities in development plans and lack of housing pattas (title deeds) given to coastal communities, were highlighted in terms of access to housing. Government schemes related to housing and funds are available under the National Housing Development Board, and states also have schemes but access often depended on political patronage, it was pointed out.

The various health problems faced by women vendors and those working in fish-processing units were largely due to the abysmal working conditions—lack of access to water and toilets, long hours in the sun, and poor access to healthcare facilities. Apart from suggestions to address these problems, several central and state schemes were discussed at the workshop, related to solid and biowaste management, health-insurance schemes, public-health schemes, and health-promotion schemes.

Violence against women, as participants at the workshop pointed out, starts from the womb with sex-selective abortion, and continues



Participants at the workshop. The groups shared their experiences, with facilitators for each session then supplementing the inputs with legal provisions and schemes on those topics

against the girl-child into adulthood, with new forms of dowry and heightened consumerism correlated to expenses on larger boats and fishing gear, making the girl-child a burden on families. Increasing violence and lack of safety in the workplace and discrimination

Increasing violence and lack of safety in the workplace and discrimination against women in society and caste panchayats were common across states.

against women in society and caste *panchayats* were common across states.

Opportunities to address these issues, apart from the campaigns launched by NGOs, presented themselves in the form of laws and mechanisms that protected women. These included the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, which has increased penalties for sexual violence, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012). Schemes to provide women survivors of violence and women in difficult circumstances food, shelter, clothing, medical care, legal aid and short-stay facilities were discussed.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), was poorly implemented across states, and with increased mechanization of fisheries, young boys were in demand as labour, resulting in drop-out before completion of schooling. Problems with government schools, including lack of infrastructure, constant transfer of teachers, and the lack of affordability of quality private education, resulted in poor educational levels among the fishing communities. Suggestions for improvement included a ban on certain types of fishing craft and gear; free, compulsory and quality education upto the age of 18 years for

all children; amendments made to the RTE Act and ensuring its implementation; stopping further privatization of education; and ensuring severe punishment to teachers involved in corporal punishment or sexual abuse.

It was also recommended that *panchayats* form—as they are supposed to—standing committees for education and allocate them funds appropriately. School management committees ought to function and professional guidance given to youth from fishing communities for vocations and employment. Quota systems should also be made available for these youth in fisheries-related jobs. According to RTE Act, 25 per cent of seats have to be reserved for the poor and other categories, no donations are allowed, no child can be held back until completion of elementary education, and special training needs to be given to school dropouts. Schemes to promote education among poor and marginalized sections included *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (education for all movement) and its components, the mid-day meal scheme, the more recent *Swachh Vidyalaya* (clean schools) Initiative scheme from 2014 which provides toilets to all the schools, reducing dropouts, especially of girl children. Apart from this, most states have schemes under the various departments (fisheries, SC/ST department, etc) for scholarships, loans, and cash awards that can be accessed by fishing communities.

Relief schemes

Social-protection schemes were available in most states for housing, water and sanitation, roads, electricity and saving-cum-relief, while very few states had schemes for life insurance and natural disasters, the workshop was told. Most states had group accident insurance schemes, but only Kerala had rehabilitation schemes for sea erosion, eviction for port development, old-age pension for allied workers and insurance for allied workers. Overall, credit support system and debt relief were very weak and only three states

had schemes for skill development training, with Odisha spending large sums on non-conventional sources of energy.

Recommendations were made for schemes that could be taken up like natural disaster compensation/sea erosion/loss of coastal space due to changes in coastal landforms, payment to displaced fishers to find alternative employment due to development, compensation against loss of livelihood against oil spill and environmental hazards like pollution. Specifically, in the post-harvest sector, it was suggested that identity cards be given to bona fide fish vendors; potable water at fish-landing centres, harbours and fish markets; better sanitation facilities; schemes to have clean non-conventional energy sources; mobile banking facility at fish markets and at fish-landing centres could be developed; and, as in Tamil Nadu, other states could ask for legislative or policy support for fishers involved in post harvest activities. NFDB's climate change fund could support schemes for protection from extreme weather events at fish markets. Due to seasonal fluctuations in the market and fishing bans, allowances could be given to women vendors, alongside support schemes related to occupational hazards, as well as support schemes for traditional fish processors, women headload workers, bicycle fish vendors, petty sellers and those involved in ancillary activities like basket weaving. Additionally, nutritional support schemes for the children are needed, as well as assistance to families of fishers arrested (as in Tamil Nadu); coverage of insurance to houses due to sea erosion or cyclones; better scholarships for studying at maritime universities; and support schemes like pension for widows.

The groups at the workshop discussed their understanding of what constituted small-scale fisheries. Emerging from the discussions were the six criteria that could be used to determine small-scale fisheries, namely area of fishing, distance

from shore, depth, gear, craft and propulsion. It was clear that definitions would have to be area specific using a combination of criteria, and ideally codified, thus providing a list of contextual definitions of SSF at the national level.

Putting into perspective the various social issues raised by participants, links were made to the changes in fisheries practices and what was happening in the communities. Destruction of the fisheries and resources went hand in hand with destruction of social norms and values, abdicating all responsibility for future generations, it was pointed out. The relevance of what was happening in the fisheries to the changes in the social fabric were emphasized and participants were urged to reflect on what they wanted for the future and demand changes accordingly.

Presentations were made by participants with a history of organizing various types of organizations, who talked about how they dealt with issues faced by women in small-scale fisheries, as well as the challenges they faced within their structures, within their communities and at the political level. It was clear that patriarchal norms within the communities, the caste *panchayats*, fishworker organizations



Field visits to various fish markets in Chennai helped participants observe situations that were different from their states, raising issues that they could discuss with each other

ICSF



Participants decided on their action plans for the future, which included surveying of numbers of women in small-scale fisheries in different roles. A clear outcome of the workshop was the need expressed by several groups for a national platform for women in small-scale fisheries

52

and the political system prevented them from voicing their concerns, leave alone actively participating in the fisheries management and in areas that affected their lives and livelihood. Despite this, successes had been achieved through protracted struggles, in cases where organizations were strong and united and had clearly defined perspectives and priorities. The importance of groups coming together, ideally linking to broader movements and trade unions, was clearly articulated.

Participants from several states decided on their action plans for the future, which included surveying and mapping their markets and numbers of women in small-scale fisheries in different roles; taking up social issues that they had learnt from the workshop through identification of schemes in their states and demanding their implementation, strengthening the membership base of their associations or organizations and disseminating information on laws and schemes relevant to them. A clear outcome of the workshop was the need expressed by several groups for a national platform for women in small-scale fisheries.

The diversity of languages posed a challenge at the workshop. That was

overcome largely through ensuring that each group had a person familiar with English and the local state language. Field visits to various fish markets in Chennai helped participants observe situations that were different from their states, raising issues that they could discuss with each other. Documentary films screened were eye-openers to the majority of the participants, most of whom were unfamiliar with issues in the National Parks and Sanctuaries. One was on the mangrove forests of Sunderbans in South 24 Parganas in West Bengal and the struggles of the local canoe fisherwomen; another was on women seaweed collectors in the Gulf of Mannar, Tamil Nadu. ❧

For more

sites.google.com/view/trainingwomenicsf/home

Website of the Training Programme "Enhancing Capacities of Women Fishworkers in India for The Implementation of The SSF Guidelines"