

Note on Women fish vendors in India

Introduction

India continues to be among the top 10 producers of marine and inland capture fish, according to FAO, after China, with a production of 8.2mn tonnes in 2012. The annual per capita consumption of fish in India was estimated at 9.8 kg in 2011. Inland fisheries are especially important for food security as almost all production goes for human consumption. Fish is especially important for the economically weaker sections of the population, providing a cheap and accessible source of protein and essential micronutrients. A large section of the population also depends on fish resources (both marine and inland) for their livelihoods, employment, and income. Currently, 14.49 mn people are estimated to be employed in the fisheries sector, which contributes 0.96 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP).

I. WOMEN AND THEIR ROLE IN POST-HARVEST ACTIVITIES, PARTICULARLY FISH VENDING

Women play critical roles in fisheries, particularly in the pre- and post-harvest sectors. Looking at marine fisheries, active marine fishing is generally undertaken by men, although a small percentage of women do take part in nearshore fishing, seaweed harvesting, and the collection of clams, mussels and bivalves. According to the Marine Fisheries Census, 2010, the total marine fisherfolk population of nine coastal States and two Union Territories in mainland India is 3,999,214. Notably, of the 864,550 fishermen families involved in fishing-related activities, 407,558 are women (approximately 48 per cent), with 182,654 of them engaged in marketing of fish, compared to 40,652 men. It provides further evidence that marketing of fish is primarily a women's domain, with Orissa and West Bengal as exceptions (see Table1: Comparative tables of CMFRI 2005 and 2010 on gender) . Similar data is unfortunately not available for inland fisheries, though the picture is likely to be similar, with women dominating marketing and processing activities.

Women are thus the primary players in processing, marketing and selling the catch. After the fish has landed, it is the women who take charge of the catch and sell the fish for money and food, contributing to household incomes and food security, and to the local economy. Their labour is, however, often not recognized. Fish vendors operate as an important link between producers and the final consumers, making fish available to consumers in urban and remote rural areas, and enhancing food security in tangible, but unrecognized, ways.

In recent years, competition for fish, from exporters and traders with greater access to credit and capital, has, however, affected the overall access of women vendors to fish. This, coupled with the problems they face at harbours, landing centres and markets, and the lack of access to basic facilities at these locations, is affecting their ability to retain their important role in marketing. It is vitally important that the work of fish vendors be recognized and supported.

II. FISH VENDING

Fish vending is a traditional occupation that has been a means of livelihood for thousands

in India, with the majority of fish vendors being women. Fish vendors engage in their trade in various ways: they procure their fish directly from landing centres, where they participate in daily auctions of the catch; they buy from traders and merchants; or they buy from the wholesale markets for resale at retail/local markets. Vendors also carry out value addition by sorting, grading, cleaning and icing the fish⁸.

Fish may be sold as either (a) fresh fish that is stored in ice and sold in local or distant markets or door-to-door by vendors, or (b) salted, dried or smoked fish, which is sold in local markets or to merchants who take it to other markets once it is processed; such processing is usually done by women using traditional methods.

Types of fish vendors

Fish vendors can be broadly classified under the following categories:

- 1) ***Stationary vendors who vend on a regular basis at specific locations:*** Many vendors sell in designated wholesale or retail markets. They often transport the fish from the landing centre to these markets in trucks or mini-vans, which they hire. Some buy from wholesale markets and sell at retail markets, while some others are wholesale suppliers themselves. Vendors may also procure fish from the landing sites for sale at roadside markets ('natural markets'), where they have been traditionally congregating and vending fish for years. Many fish vendors sell fish at the landing sites themselves— at harbours and beaches. There is thus considerable variation in the scale of operations of stationary vendors—ranging from petty sellers who barter fish in exchange for edible items such as sweet corn, sweets and fruits (or vice versa), to those who are large wholesalers.
- 2) ***Peripatetic vendors who walk from place to place to sell their fish:*** These are usually women fish vendors who purchase fish directly at auctions that take place at the village/wholesale markets/landing centres, and sell fish door-to-door, traveling on foot, and carrying their fish in bamboo baskets or aluminum vessels. They are a major source of fish supply to consumers within, and close to, coastal areas.
- 3) ***Mobile vendors who move around on bicycles or motorized vehicles:*** This type of fish vending, which is very common in States such as Orissa, primarily involves men⁹. These vendors arrive at the landing centres from different villages and purchase fish at auctions at the village/wholesale markets/landing centres, for sale back in their villages. They also sell fish door-to-door.

Apart from this, many fish vendors use other means to sell their fish. In Goa, for example, where tourism is the backbone of the local economy, vendors have arrangements with hotels and restaurants to sell fish to them directly. This ensures daily sales and an assured income.

III. PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN FISH VENDORS

The nature of the product handled by women fish vendors causes a certain stigma that fishermen themselves do not generally face. Unlike men, whose labour is largely confined

to the sea, river or lake, fish vendors have to travel with their product to market places. They have to interact with the public and the law. In the process, they are often forced to deal with inbred prejudices and problems of various kinds. The following are some of the key problems they face:

1) ***Distances and lack of basic facilities at harbours and landing centres:***

With greater mechanization and motorization, harbours and fish landing centres have become more centralized. Women vendors thus have to travel long distances to access fish. This may even mean staying overnight at harbours and landing centres, in order to be present for the early morning fish landing and auctions. Transportation to landing sites/harbours is sometimes unreliable, and basic facilities (toilets, storage, lights, waiting areas, night shelters) are absent. Under these circumstances, women often find themselves vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment.

2) ***Poor access to credit, exorbitant interest rates:*** Technology-induced changes to the nature of fishing operations have also meant larger catches. Women, with poor access to credit and capital, are rarely able to compete with large-scale traders, and commission and export agents. To be able to access fish even in small quantities, they have to procure credit from middlemen and moneylenders, often at exorbitant rates of interest.

3) ***Lack of public transport to markets:*** While a few women sell the fish at the landing centre or harbour itself, for the rest, the next major challenge after procurement is to transport the fish to the market place. As the distances involved may be considerable, women need to use some form of transport. In many situations, vendors are usually denied access to public transport, given the nature of the product they are dealing with. This means hiring autorickshaws, or other forms of transport, a significant expense in itself. Male fish vendors, with access to their own transport, are at a comparative advantage.

4) ***Lack of ice and proper storage facilities:*** Fish is a highly perishable commodity, and if vendors are to prevent spoilage and get a better price, they need to preserve the fish. They need access to ice and iceboxes. During the peak season, when ice is in short supply, it is often monopolized by large traders and intermediaries.

5) ***Problems at marketplaces:*** At the market itself, vendors face other kinds of problems. Fish vending spaces are either not recognized or just do not exist. Vendors are often harassed into paying 'informal taxes' in order to continue vending fish at a particular spot. With the absence of legitimate vending zones, those vending fish on city pavements and other areas are perceived as encroachers on public spaces. They are constantly harassed and threatened with eviction by the police and civic authorities.

6) ***Poor market infrastructure:*** Where there are existing markets, basic facilities for storing, processing, and selling fish; clean toilets; access to potable running water; and adequate waste disposal measures are usually not available. Such facilities are essential for the hygienic handling of fish, for the health and wellbeing of vendors, for consumer health, and for enabling women to engage in their occupation in a dignified manner.

Given the important role and contribution of women fish vendors, it is indeed unfortunate that the majority of them continue to struggle with such problems on a daily basis.

IV. Mumbai workshop recommendations

1. Facilities at existing markets (for water, sanitation, waste disposal) need to be revamped.
2. Seating and fish storage facilities need to be improved.
3. Fish stalls should be located at the front of markets (for better visibility).
4. Tampering with the weighing of fish in wholesale markets needs to be controlled
5. Existing vendors should be involved in the redevelopment process at all stages.
6. All redevelopment should be funded by government agencies like NFDB. (The PPP model should be avoided.)
7. Vertical development of markets, with different floors for different fish product categories, could be considered, with the ground floor set aside for fresh fish.
8. Licences should be provided to all legitimate vendors through a transparent process.
9. Licences should be transferable within families so that future generations can continue in the trade.
10. The problems faced by women fish vendors at fish landing centres need to be addressed.
11. Infrastructure at fish landing centres needs to be improved urgently, with a special focus on hygiene and sanitary conditions.
12. Vendors should be provided storage facilities.
13. Women should be ensured access to auction halls.
14. The fishing community/women vendors should be an integral part of the process of developing new fish markets.
15. A street vendor policy should be notified. Fish vendors selling on the street should be provided with identity cards so as to be recognized as fishworkers
16. Marketing co-operatives/self-help groups (SHGs) of women fish vendors should be facilitated and supported.
17. Training should be provided to fisherwomen on organizational skills, value addition, hygienic handling of fish, financial management and so on.
18. Fisherwomen should have ensured access to programmes such as savings-cum-relief schemes for income during lean periods.
19. They should be provided with insurance and pension, and housing support for single women.
20. Compensations for lost livelihood opportunities should be ensured.