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NFF WOMEN'S PRESPECTIVE

The women in the fishing community participate in the fish related activities as fish vendors, working in the fish processing plants, net weaving, and helping with all post harvesting processes. It is extremely clear that even though we play an important role in the village economy, we are kept out of any decision-making roles in the fisheries development and planning is concerned. Empowerment of women was necessary to bring us to the consciousness of our status in the community and the various issues that are affecting us, mainly the gender issue.

The first phase was to build up confidence in women that we can develop our own activity. In the early stages, monthly meetings were organized and different subjects were brought for discussion and we reflected on the pros and cons of every issue. The women were schooled to moderate the discussions, to make concluding remarks and to make reports.

ACTIVITIES IN DIFFERENT STATES

Kerala

In Kerala, the women's groups coming together decided to take up the issue of the transport facilities to the market place. The fish vending women were not allowed to ride in public transport. In order to get the women into an agitational role, the women were empowered in their capacity to communicate, and network with other villages and districts. Then to get the public support, the issue was highlighted through street plays and corner meetings etc.

Though the actual struggle had only a partial success, we learned a great deal from it. We learned, how to present an issue to the government, how to collect the data-statistics regarding fish vendors, various market routes etc. We also built up confidence for ourselves in meeting officials and discussing our problems with them.

Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, the coastal women came together and gave a memorandum to the government expressing the oppression women were experiencing on account of the gender differentiation. We demanded transportation facilities for fishing women, measures to prevent harassment of women by military persons, and for banning the illegal distilling of liquor and also to open a women police cell in Gopalpur.

West Bengal

In West Bengal, the organization of net weavers was attempted. 4000 women are involved in net weaving. The following steps were taken.

Study of the problem

Organization of the women & creation of a women's wing of the West Bengal Fish workers

Conducting literacy programs for women and helping a group of 40 women to produce nets as a collective in order to increase their earning. We also waged a major struggle for including women in the Saving Cum Relief Scheme. We have succeeded in this.

Maharashtra

Fighting against the ESSEL WORLD, we brought about awareness for the need to protect mangroves. Our struggle continues till we protect our water bodies and nurture the resource.

Gujarat

The women in Umbergaon have been fighting against MEGA COMMERCIAL PORT. They have become aware of their right to protect the fishing grounds and the seacoast to protect the traditional right of protecting the fishing communities. We were part of the struggle against the port, and we too were arrested and jailed and beaten up. Our leader Col. Pratap Save was murdered by the Police. We organized massive protest against this.

Tamil Nadu

The women have been on the forefront to protect their right on hand made nets against machine made nets. They also acquired their right to take fish in ordinary busses. We have been in the forefront of our struggle against industrial aquaculture and the implementation of the Coastal Zone Regulation Notification.

Saving cum Credit Scheme.

As credit is one of the major needs of women, saving cum credit schemes have been initiated with different groups of women in several areas. Credits do come from various sources but a group process would control it. To a large extent, this program works where ever a regular supervision and monitoring is carried out.

TRAINING PROGRAMS (TP's)

In 1993, a seven days TP was conducted in the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, on women's perspective. This group has worked out a follow up program and TP for the other states. In 1994, the data collection of women involved in fisher related activities were initiated. The TP's on women's perspective were conducted in Malwan, Goa and Tamil Nadu. We also conducted several sessions to build up women's perspective.

WOMEN WORKING IN PROCESSING PLANTS

In 1993, the shrimp peelers issue was studied and the reports and memorandums were submitted & discussed with the National Commission for Women and National Commission for Labour in Delhi. As each state is responsible for enforcing the contract labour Act and Minimum Wages Act the state governments were pressurized. Their demands were payment of the minimum wages and regulating the working hours and also the execution of the contract Labour Act and the Migrant Labor Act. The core team conducted several meetings with those going to the processing plants and their parents, educating them about the provisions of the Inter State Migrant Labour Act and the Contract Labour Act.

NATIONAL WORKSHOP AND PUBLIC HEARING

In 1994, a National workshop was organized in Ernakulam- Kerala, to take up the cause of migrant women workers in processing plants. 40,000 women have migrated from Kerala to different state in India. Prior to the workshop extensive study and

surveys were conducted by different groups, contacts were made to women workers in different places and found suitable resource persons. A public hearing session was also organized.

The public hearing on the struggle of women in fisheries was a historic and unique event. The verdict of the jury on the problems of the migrant workers in the processing plants is a classic one and indicates the manner in which the problems can be handled.

The workshop brought to light various problems affecting women, like the victimization of the fish vending women in the market; fish peeling women facing displacement from the mechanized fish drivers; and the net weaving women facing displacement due to the introduction of net making machines.

As a follow up CEC in Delhi conducted a major study, which led to a preparation of Dossier and a book of STORY OF SUJA ABRAHAM. NFF and WFFP used massively to campaign against this exploitation of women workers in Processing plants. We circulated these in schools, colleges, workers, trade unions. All these led to raising the issue at the INDIAN PARLIAMENT. The prime minister appointed a committee to look into this issue. Further GIGI ANTONY AND BABY MERCY went to Gujarat last year along with CEC members and other Trade Union leaders and visited several Processing plants to see whether there is any improvement. In their study, they found that there were some improvement, but need to intervene collectively to unionize the WOMEN WORKERS IN PROCESSING PLANTS IN THE ACTUAL WORKPLACE. We have not started this process because of various other implications like dismissal etc.

FAMINE CUM RELIEF SCHEMES

The discrimination against women in the famine cum relief fund was taken up at the national level – although women are registered as fish workers and they do contribute to the welfare fund, they are denied of the benefit, which the men folks enjoy. Hence the fisher women in all the coastal states have organized marches protest meetings and satyagrahas, which contoured for 15 days. As a result, the states of West Bengal and Maharashtra have included women in their programs other states are still in the process only. Once again this was a demand in the FISHERES STROM DELHI AGITATION.

WOMENS PERSPECTIVE

Persistent efforts have been made by the Women's core team to integrate gender perspective into the general training programs where the fisheries policy and development policy have been the main topics for the discussion.

Women, though their strong demands have made room for women's issues in the general struggle. As the fisheries are in crisis, the main concern is the conservation and protection of the fisheries and therefore the unions are reluctant to include other issues of drinking water, housing, sanitation, and health facilities for women in market places and facilities for their transport. Domestic violence and rape cases

were taken up and some of them were handled legally. The women are insisting on to have 1/3 representation in the decision-making bodies.

The situation of the women in the fisheries has been brought to the peoples attention in the following ways.

We made several representations at various forums.

Drawing the attention of the broader women's movement in the country to the situation of the women in the fisheries sector.

FUTURE PLANS

Women have to be exceptionally strong and intellectually sharp to make any breakthrough. The core group has now a better grasp of the issues at stake and more clarity as to how these issues can be addressed to. Therefore the core group will continue their meetings and pursue the struggle from within.

The fish vendors problems is to be taken up at the National Level and see how their rights could be safeguarded in the changing norms of liberalization. This demand has an important place in the NFF Charter of Demands 2002.

The core group will continue to study the problems of migration and see how a more comprehensive law can be enacted and implemented so that the women workers rights can be protected.

Plan to activate the state where the women's issues and gender perspective are not given due importance. To have more training programs and workshops to highlight the issues.

There is a need for taking concrete steps to bring women participation in the decision-making process of World Forum of Fisher Peoples(WFFP) in the local, national, regional and WFFP level. The women have to play an important role.

Here in the WFFP we have to initiate the process of family dimension and community dimension. From fisherman we have come to fishworkers to remove gender bias. From fishworkers, we have to move to fishers – fisherpeople – to express the family and community dimension.

Women in Fisheries have to initiate the process of nurturing, managing the fish resource as a life giving process to bring about a vibrant fishing community all over the world. Therefore, the right to livelihood becomes a fundamental right.

Women have to play an important role to bring about a political change that the fishing community depends on fishing for its livelihood, that we should own water bodies, fishing implements and we should manage the distribution of our catch.

NFF CORE GROUP

Purnima Mehar

Baby Mercy