

Globalisation and Women: New Forms of Work, Survival Strategies and Images of Migrant women workers in the Fish Processing Industry in India

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The paper focuses on the changes wrought in the identity of women of fishing communities by the transformation of their traditional world of work by integration into the global economy. The fish processing industry employs more than one hundred thousand workers. The major centres of the industry are Veraval and Porbunder in Gujarat, Mumbai and Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, Goa, Mangalore, the Kollam- Kochi belt of Kerala, Tutucorin and Mandapam in Tamil Nadu, Vishakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Calcutta and neighbouring areas in West Bengal.

The industry employs migrant women workers on contract in almost all parts of the country. While majority of these migrant workers are drawn from Kerala, of late, women from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have also found employment in the sector though the stereotype of the Malayali woman as the migrant worker persists. The migrant section of the workforce is recruited by agents and contractors who deploy them for work in the processing units but retain control over their work and life.

The processing industry is classified as a seasonal industry and has been seen as being operational only for eight-nine months of the year. This is not necessarily the case today. Many workers on contract employment go back to work almost immediately after their return home from the unit to which they had been taken, indicating that the earlier case of a lean period on account of shortage of raw material no longer holds true with freezers and modernisation in the sector. Alongside the big international chains, which is catered to by a number of large Indian chains, there is a new type of flatted unit that just specialises in the peeling, cleaning and the freezing of shrimps or prawns. These work throughout the year, at least on a skeletal basis. Such units are not entirely dependent on the procurement contracts of the big firms: some of them are in the export business themselves. All of them employ women as daily wagers to do the cleaning and peeling and pay them piece rates. There is no security of employment and most workers get meagre wages for a week's work. This industry has expanded in this particular form possibly in the wake of intense competition in the export sector with East Asian countries such as Thailand and Indonesia whose prices are competitive.

Migration initially attracted women, mostly young, from fish worker communities. But in the recent past there are instances of families of women moving out of the villages to the urban confines of the units. That these women go on to live in the squalour of prison-like urban confines at the work place does not appear to make a fish processing job any less attractive a proposition. For them, a whole new universe opens up with the taking up of such work. In this paper, we focus on the impact of this transition on the

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lives of the women and the new image of the woman worker that goes back to the villages and small towns from where they are recruited.

Women from the fisher community form a major section of the workforce recruited. Changes in fishing activity in terms of control over the catch and distribution forced women from these communities to redefine their work. This means that the traditional scope for women to hawk or salt and dry fish is limited. It is also no longer feasible to accommodate the increasing population into an occupation that has fewer direct job opportunities on account of productivity-enhancing changes in the production process. This was the rationale for the women migrating to the newly emerging fish processing units spread out all over the coastline of India. This has witnessed a further impetus in the nineties with the Indian industry competing at the global level with Southeast Asian countries, China and even South Asian countries.

In the course of our investigation that entailed initially a pilot study and then a detailed questionnaire with the help of research assistants it was found that the women were from a more varied caste background. They stuck to their jobs much longer than is generally implied by descriptions such as seasonal migrant. The women also had choice as regards where to go depending on the wage offered and the conditions at the workplace. All of this means a rethinking of the classification of such migration as being temporary, circular, transient or otherwise. Also, the stereotyped image of the young woman/girl worker herded by the middlepersons to their new work and living place is an incomplete representation of reality. There is a certain sense of loss of control that the women face initially in their new homes/hostels. At the same time, they also grapple to give meaning to their lives and evolve strategies to survive despite all the odds. Our attempt to look at the new relationships they establish at work and away from it provides for a dimension of agency in how they cope with everyday life.

A gradual change in the composition of the women who are recruited appears to be visible. Women from castes other than the traditional fishing communities today account for nearly half the workforce in the processing units. The fact that the workplace is a factory and not the fishermen's wharf where the women earlier went to buy fish to vend or share in the labour of the entire family plays a vital role in the acceptance of this work today as "respectable" and therefore sought after even by women from other communities. The redefinition of work, in other words, has an impact on migration and employment. It also posits a disjuncture between caste and occupation. The image of the processing unit as new form of work makes it an acceptable occupation and leads to integration of varied caste groups of women from Kerala as migrant women workers.

The cultural milieu of Kerala, where the saturation of employment opportunities commingle with a long history of migration for work, has contributed to the specific situation of large scale recruitment of women to processing units. The social fabric in Kerala is conducive to the gender specific migration. The women we met made the choice to migrate on their own—there was no patriarch controlling their exodus from the village. Rather, it was the aspiration of these young women to break free that provided the impetus for their migration to the towns. In some sense, their transition to the status of a migrant wage earner also contributes to

the undermining of traditional patriarchal authority back home. Simultaneously, on the work front, there are new structures of power and authority reasserting patriarchal structures with which they have to contend with.

It has been claimed that migrant women workers from Kerala are predominant in fish processing because of their special skills in fish processing tasks. But this no longer holds true. Many of the women we interviewed in the course of our survey stated that they acquired their skills on the job and that they did not bring them with them from back home. Most of the women we met stated that they never worked on prawns till they got the current job at the processing unit and that they were apprentices for no longer than 6 to 7 months. This blows up the myth that the women from Kerala find work in the units on account of their expertise.

Skill does play a role in migration, however. It appears that these women gain entry on account of the popular perception of their skill, which comes in handy for the agents and contractors. That Keralites tend to be more educated and was the conclusion of our report too and therefore more skill-upgradeable is also a useful aspect. Also it may be noted that contractors too come mainly from Kerala tilting the scale in favour of the migrant workers from Kerala when it comes to finding a job in fish processing. For the management, it secured a cheap, disciplined, efficient, clean and partially educated class of labour to work in their units. To add to it is the advantage that contract workers are practically free of all encumbrances and even captive at the workplace as they are housed close to the workplace—mostly above or beside the unit.

Women taking up work in the units primarily come from very poor households. Many a family survived with the wages of women who migrate to the processing units. Loss of livelihood in the village itself is one factor. The other significant reason is the images of work in the units that is transmitted to the villages. In any case, the younger women from the fish worker families as reported to us are not willing to go to the chantha (local fish market) to sell fish even though their mothers still go. They would much rather prefer to go off to work in the units far away as that would open new horizons for them. One of the women from the fish worker community we met had worked as a domestic help in Kerala before she took up work in the unit.

A few of them had tried their hand at tailoring and embroidery at a neighbouring convent but because it did not fetch them adequate income they took up the processing unit offer. Most of the answers to the question as to why they took up work were, that if they did not, their families could not survive. The image of the woman as an earning member of the family gets to have widespread acceptance, albeit socially legitimised on the ground that these young girls go out as migrant women to earn their dowries. Central to such social consent is the notion of security of the young women's persons and morals under the stewardship of chechis and chetans, recruiting agents placed in a network of kinship with the young girls.

Conditions and culture:

The conditions governing the employment of the young women at the units depend on the middle persons who take them as they are his/her wards. The

period of employment, wages, facilities, and freedom to move depends on the rapport the women develop with the contractor or his agents. Be that as it may, with the increasing opportunities in the sector, the women's choice is also wider and this helps them make the best of the situation, given their dire economic need to take up work.

The economic impetus definitely is central to the women's decision to migrate. But that does not explain all of it. The women are willing to put up with the irregular, long hours of work with low wages as they do gain in non-economic terms as well by shifting from the village to the town. The distance from home in the case of these girls also contributes to their becoming more self-reliant as well as free to make their own decisions on every matter concerning their lives. They do not give all their wages to the family straight away. They have the freedom to spend at least a part of their earnings the way they want to. They also imbibe new values as young women who work to earn a living far away from their family's control. So much have the working women influenced the village back home that they have become the new role models for the younger women of the village to emulate. The good clothes they bring back from Bombay or Calcutta, their ability to see faraway places on account of their employment in those places, etc provide others an incentive to follow suit. One elderly woman told us that their house was constructed with the savings of the three women members of the family as the husband of her niece was an invalid and therefore the niece and her daughters have been working in fish processing units the last six years. There was another case that we came across, where the elderly grandmother accompanied her three grand daughters to work in a unit in Mangalore, as she did not like the idea of "her young birds flying out alone". An invalid, she nonetheless did some peeling work in the unit to eke out a living together with her grandchildren.

At the same time, there is also a negative image of the women circulating in the communities about their job. This is the more conservative attitude that does not find it easy to accept the women in their new social role — as migrant income remitter to their families. This has also gained more currency following incidents of sexual harassment and the suicide of some women in the units in Goa and Bombay.

"Getting work back home is difficult; therefore we take up work in the faraway unit. Women carry tray packs, which is a very strenuous work, we face great difficulty at the unit.

After work we wash the worktable and the floor regularly and are forced to bear with the combined smell of fish and chlorine on account of which many of us vomit. The bleaching powder used burns our eyes. We are also made to wash the toilets in many of the units" Ammini

The net impact of the employment of these women in the units has been the tiding over of want in many poor households in coastal and highland Kerala. It has also contributed in some ways to the making of the personalities of these young women as bread earners for their families. It has opened new avenues for the women but at the same time it has also exposed them to the vagaries of a new work culture and discipline of the modern industry creating a more oppressive set of relations at the workplace. This has meant

a break from their traditional modes of existence. Most of these women come from either fishing or daily wage earning agricultural labour families with little industrial work exposure. This is probably a factor that helps the contractors to exploit the women for they are quite unaware of the legislated limits on hours of work and issues such as minimum wage and look up to the employer as their benefactor. Also the vulnerable material conditions of the families of the women make it easy for the contractors to tilt the scales in their favour to the disadvantage of the women who are denied even basic freedoms in many units.

Through the years, they have also begun to raise these issues in their units—demanding eight hours' work, minimum wages and better facilities at the workplace .

The reason why the contractors easily transport the women from their village environs to the units is grounded in the nature of the network that has been established. The network delineates a system of sub-agents, agents, contractors and, at the top, the company - quite pyramidal in terms of power relations. The hierarchy gets inverted in terms of endearment. The sub-agent, in fact, is one from among the workers who has assumed this status by virtue of her long years of service or because of her proximity to the contractor or for any other reason. But for all purposes, it is to her that the workers turn for help and advice. At the same time, she is also the point of control and regulation for the women. Most of the workers are not even aware of the other people in the rungs above the sub-agent responsible for securing them work in the unit. In fact, during the course of our survey studying the conditions of women in the fish processing units, we found that a large section of the women were unaware of the method of recruitment, the name of the company for which they worked or the name of the contractor. Their familiarity was with one proximate cog in the chain of recruitment and they were unconcerned beyond that. Therefore, we find that the whole network of agents and sub-agents and the latter's close links with the communities from where workers are recruited facilitate easy transit of the worker from the village to the unit. In fact, there is a community established between this chechi (literally, elder sister) and the girls she recruits which, in normal situations, is a very close-knit, tight bond that makes it easy to get them to accept her authority and disciplining at the workplace as well. She thus assumes the role of the sirdar of earlier times in the modern processing unit- one site of social as well as individual control of the contract employees.

The workers today have more choice with regard to contractors and workplaces. A large number of women we spoke to already had offers but were waiting to take up the best offer in every sense after a thorough survey of the market from discussions with one another, even us! Thus when we look at the impact of migration on the lives of these women we need to look at its micro level consequences too. At a macro level the insecurity of employment characterises the unorganised sector. On the other hand, in certain sectors, the growth of the unorganised sector has also opened up avenues to groups in society for very different reasons.

Though the women are part of the mass of unorganised workers, there have

been efforts to unionise them or to take up the issue of labour rights among them. There are many cases of resistance to the exploitative conditions. In 1994, there was a big furore when some Tamil women in the Goan units protested. The women wanted to go back and this resulted in a deadlock between the workers and the contractor. It was only on the intervention of the Commissioner of Labour that these women were released and sent back home after all their dues were cleared. The travails of the migrant women working in the units in Goa is brought out in great detail in the study made by Desai.

A case that was highlighted by the media was the reason for a lot of debate in the last few years. Early in 1997, Suja Abraham, a migrant worker from Kerala, ran away from Ravi Fisheries in the Thane area, unable to cope with the environment of work. She moved to work in a nearby unit where the conditions of work were relatively better. But she was soon tracked down by the factory goondas of Ravi Seafoods and taken back there. On refusing to work at the Ravi Seafoods, she was harassed and ill treated there and tortured with lock-up and starvation. Then, it is believed that she attempted to commit suicide. She was severely injured and was under hospital care at Mulund hospital. A police case was lodged by the Laghu Kamgar Union, which took up the issue of the woman worker's harassment at the Ravi unit. In the wake of these happenings, the girls at the nearby Brittany Seafoods started an agitation demanding eight hours work and better wages. On March 14, 1997, they struck work and wrote slogans on empty packaging cases, demanding eight hours' work. Ravi company workers also struck work. The 250 odd migrant contract workers in the two units were, by the very evening, unceremoniously bundled into buses and sent back to Kerala. So what began as an attempt to challenge the oppressive work environment ended in a tragic fiasco. Nonetheless what is important to note is that the image of the docile woman worker is once again challenged.

The women also forge relations with various community networks at their place of residence. Far away from home, in Vashi, New Mumbai, the Devadan Kendra, provides the site for their community celebrations such as Onam and Christmas. Traditional sadyas and kaikotikali were part of their life far away from home. The Kendra also provided them with Malayalam magazines and kept their networks active. These sites also become focal points during strife and insecurity as for example in the above case the church and the social workers were able to at least establish relations on a regular basis with these women.

The women in these units are also not given the freedom to move about alone, except with a male escort and that too for a short while. The conditions at the workplace are similar: 12 hours of work, poor wages and impermanent work.

According to our survey, it was the norm that women could go out of the unit only once a week and that too mostly under surveillance. Of course, all this is explained away as being done to protect the women from facing any harassment outside. The other side of the story is the fact that these practices deny the women their basic right of freedom. The wages are also not uniform and, in many cases, are well below the minimum wage for the unskilled worker.

Health and safety of the workers:

In the case of the processing workers, the quality of the environment at work determines the quality of the workers' life even after work hours. This is because the workers' lodgings are provided either atop the processing unit or beside it, in most cases. This arrangement, as noted earlier, has been adopted so as to ensure the availability of the workers whenever the consignment of raw material arrives, whatever time of the day or night. So the workers stay confined within the precincts of their workplace, except once a week when they are escorted out for their weekly off. Such organisation of production in the fish processing units resembles not any modern capitalist enterprise, but more primitive practices prevalent in the early phase of industrialisation when apprentices stayed along with the master craftsman to learn skills from him.

The difference lies in the fact that the women are kept in such accommodation as it facilitates smoother organisation of production by perpetuating relations of subordination and domination that at times appears to be extremely coercive. But housing the workers atop the processing unit actually goes against the spirit of the safety regulations prescribed for industry. Ammonia based freezing plants are potential accident sites. Many of the units have very old freezing plants and are said to have huge Ammonia plants, meant for maintaining temperatures in the units that are not well checked. The mostly wooden flooring of the workers' lodgings offers poor insulation from the dampness of the unit below. There have been reports of accidents due to leakage of ammonia in very many places. In one such incident in Calcutta, in the eighties, there was loss of life when some of the women who had got poisoned by the ammonia gas died, though taken to the hospital. After this incident, there was general fear among the workers about staying in lodgings above the processing unit.

There have been other such incidents as well, although not fatal. "In fact, last year at the Ravi Fisheries, Thane in Mumbai, because of a leak in the ammonia plant, a number of workers suffered the poison effect and began to vomit" A number of women stated that at times they had irritation of the eye and nausea and they suspected it to be because of some leak in the plant. However, as they are contract workers, they really cannot make much noise about such things, lest they lose their job. What is appalling is that if factory inspections in a big city such as Mumbai is so cursory—one can imagine what could the situation in the small mofussil towns where a large number of units are situated.

The environment that characterises the processing units is by and large very damp and cold. Most of the units have the problem of being cluttered and congested even inside. The workplace is one long stretch of aluminium tables and trays and trays of water with, at times, grading machines close by. The women employed in the grading and the weighing as also packing sections has to stand for long intervals. This is a significant factor contributing to their ill health. The women in the peeling section have to squat for long hours amidst cold water that leaks from the iced raw material. Thus it is but natural that complaints of aches, pains and colds are common.

By and large most of the women are susceptible to a range of diseases, some of which arise from the conditions at work and some others from the poor sanitary conditions in which they live. A large number of the units we

visited could not be described as providing a clean environment to work in. Besides, the fish processing units are located mostly in the most congested, polluted parts of the city. Such location creates a set of problems. In Veraval, we found that apart from the occupational hazards that originate at the workplace, on the health front, women were exposed to the pollutants from the Indian Rayon unit situated in the area. Similarly in Tutucorin, it is said that the Sterlite Factory and other chemical companies in the neighbourhood threaten the health of workers in the vicinity. It is to be explored as to whether there can be established any direct relationship between the diseases that women are prone to and the environment around the workplace.

The women are forced by the nature of their work to handle frozen raw material for long stretches of time. It involves long hours of work in damp, cold rooms. A number of women claimed that they are very easily susceptible to respiratory disorders and at times arthritis and rheumatism. The very posture of the workers at the workplace—standing in one position for long hours, bending at the table while grading and packing or squatting and bending down while peeling—induces unhealthy physical strain.

The other most common ailments these women are susceptible to are, malaria, chickenpox, jaundice and severe diarrhoea. Apart from these major diseases that they are prone to, most of them complain aches and pains, of the head, of the body and particularly of the chest. All these come from their long hours of continuous work, which is a strain on their system.

Skin rashes and peeling off of the skin from continued work with frozen material results in, when prolonged and untreated, a range of severe skin related problems because of which some of the women give up their work at times unable to cope with the demanding nature of working fast and deftly with their fingers. "Even though the finger cracks are very painful and difficult to work with, the women continue to perform their work till it becomes unbearable"

Thus a skill which was the reason for their securing employment also results in their inability to work in the long term on account of the unscientific nature of work process- without wearing gloves to protect hands from the strain of working with frozen material with sharp, jagged edges. Very few units systematically follow the rules prescribed by the MPEDA and other regulatory agencies for the minimum requirements of a clean hygienic environment of production. It is only when the importing country delegations visit the units that the women are made to wear gloves, mouth cover and coats as stated by one of our respondents who commented - the conditions of work are hard and it is only when the Japanese come for inspections that we are made to wear uniform, gloves, mouth cover, etc.

The non- availability of clean potable water is invariably the reason for the large number of incidents of stomach ailments and jaundice afflicting the workers. The extremely unsanitary working conditions in the dormitories of the units cause urinary tract infections. The inadequate number of toilets available to the workers and lack of provision of enough water for their daily needs cause many of their problems. The units we visited in central Calcutta were all housed in dilapidated old buildings, and resembled a slum as far as the dormitory and sanitary facilities available to the

contract workers were concerned. The accommodation of 100 to 150 women in a single, albeit large room adds to the problem, as it is conducive to easy transmission of infections. At the time of our visit to Calcutta, about six women in the Liberty and the neighbouring units were down with chickenpox. It is but to be expected that the women living in such surroundings would be prone to such problems.

Another problem is the high incidence of accidental falls that result in bone fractures. There being a lot of water on the floor in the work place, it becomes a major reason for a number of women slipping and breaking their bones at the units. In Barraka, Mangalore, Lovely a woman in the peeling shed slipped and broke her backbone. The company took care of 50% of the expenses. Another similar incident was that of Rajamma working in the Chum unit in Goa, who broke the bones on her leg on slipping inside the plant. These accidents are but natural in a work environment where the floors are always full of water and the job entails washing and cleaning of the raw material inside the plant and the raw material is itself kept in ice that melts and wets the surroundings. In a number of such cases it is narrated by the women that there is no compensation made by the management. On the other hand, even if made, it is absolutely inadequate and at times the women spend a lot of money in post-recovery care by way of buying ayurvedic (ayurveda is traditional medicine) oils and tonics to revitalise broken bones. So much so that, in one instance, a woman worker said that she had to write home for money towards her treatment after a fall. There are cases where women who had taken leave after a fall to recuperate from their illness have lost their wages for the period of absence. Thus an occupational hazard in the working environment which resulted in severe injury to the worker instead of the worker getting compensated by the management in fact causes the reverse: a cut in their wages. It reveals the unprotected nature of employment of these workers. In such times, the women not only lost their hard earned little savings but also the potential earnings because they are handicapped temporarily.

In any discussion of the health of the woman worker, also involved is the nature of the reproductive system care that the women avail of. Unlike a man, the woman has to contend with her sexuality deemed vulnerable by society. A large number of the women are prone to sexual overtures at the workplace, and a number of such cases may also have happened owing to the culpability of the woman herself who was willing to trade her sexual favours in return for a secure advantageous status at the workplace. In Mumbai as also in Calcutta there is a debate among the women workers themselves as to how to handle such a fragile issue. As most of the girls who are at work come when they are at an impressionable age and have their own notions of what they want in life, there are a large number of incidents of men and women interacting outside the norm of marriage. The problem begins when the woman concerned becomes pregnant and then is forced to seek abortion. In Vashi area of Mumbai it was stated by social workers that there were large number of cases every month of women from the processing units going to the local doctor for the termination of unwanted pregnancy. In the process of going in for an inexpensive way to rid herself of her unwanted pregnancy the

woman worker becomes vulnerable to a host of diseases from the unhealthy medical practices. A large number of the women we met complained of discharge, infection as well as severe urinary tract problems. In fact one of our respondents stated that she had been on medicines for more than six months for the same reason.

Not only are the medical facilities available to the women inadequate, it is also pertinent to raise the issue of the nature of facilities available to them. The Devadan Centre in Vashi, New Mumbai that the women went for treatment on sensitive subjects such as unwanted pregnancies to a local quack or a qualified practitioner with no facilities, noted it. Such a local option though inexpensive in the short run has very large long-run costs.

Social Life and living conditions of the workers

The migrant workers attempt to create a community in their new homes. Despite their long arduous schedules they do forge networks to facilitate easier adjustment to the hostile environment at the workplace in their places of residence. No doubt these are fraught with squabbles, faction fights and everyday politics especially when they cohabit in large numbers. The woman worker derives some agency in the way she spends at least some of the money she earns. Apart from money spent on their daily necessities such as food and medicine, there are other purchases the women spend their wages on. A major expense is clothes, especially 'nighties' and 'salwar kameez'. In fact, a number of women in the course of our survey wear these and stated that they spent 1500-2000 annually on the buying of these clothes, and cosmetics. The other item into which a sizeable proportion of their wage goes is acquisition of gold ornaments.

Interestingly in some of the units, the expenses incurred for the common mess also provided the women with their monthly requirement of soap and oil. However, according to the women, they spent more money from their pocket, as they required lots of soap to rid themselves of the foul smell that came with working in the fish-processing unit for long hours. Hence the provision of soap is far from what they need to feel fresh after long arduous stretches of work. This also has a cultural connotation that they feel the need to break out from: the meen manam as they put it. In fact in the course of my interaction with them this was one point that they felt very strongly about: to rid themselves at the end of a long day of the foul smell that was a characteristic part of their work.

The women in the units live far from their homes and for many of them it is a new experience. Initially there are cases of homesickness and inability to adjust to the new environment but over time they get used to the change. It is fine for women who have continued to work in the same unit for many years but for the more nomadic ones, it is a tough battle to survive in the unfamiliar environment. As a number of the women in a particular unit have either come from the same village or have built rapport with one another after having worked together over the years, bonds of community develop among them and it is this solidarity that keeps them smiling in the face of the tough life of work in the unit. Also, cooperative activities by way of going to see films, to the markets and to church/ temple provides additional respite from their tiring work schedules.

In some cases the rather hostile and severe environment make them vulnerable to mental ill health as well. It is interesting to note the recreational

facilities the workers developed so that the monotony of their work does not pervade their social life as well. A large number of the girls and women we met stated that in their free time they hired a VCR and watched films, some others played games such as hop scotch and cards and there were some who tried to sleep off the weariness of overwork.

Housing facilities:

Most of the units employing migrant women workers provide some form of hostel accommodation to the workers. Recently, with the difficulties faced by managements on account of largescale checks by the Inspectorate of Factories and Labour officers, there has begun a tendency to let women come from their local accommodation. This is the case in Vashi, New Mumbai today. Thus, alongside the earlier forms of accommodation such as the dormitories and hostels, today we see the women workers living as tenants in groups of four and five in the vicinity of the processing unit. But, by and large, the earlier norm prevails.

Most women in the units state that their dwellings are above the production unit. This is the definitely the rule in Calcutta where about three units located in the city have accommodated their workers in rickety dwellings above the unit. The women are not only living in overcrowded small rooms: 10 of them in a 15ft by 12 ft room, with leaking roof, the drains overflowing and a few dirty bathrooms.

The poor sanitation facilities in the hostels are often reasons for the reproductive health and urinary tract infections that the women are prone to. In Calcutta, the living environs of the unit workers are virtual extensions of drains, dark, hostile, crowded places where sunlight hardly permeates any time of the year. Besides this, the cooped up living environment makes women vulnerable to infections any one of them gets- thus if one of them contracts chicken pox, the entire community becomes susceptible to it.

A hall accommodating 125 -150 women seems the norm whether it be a unit in Mumbai, Tutucorin, Goa or Veraval. The other prevalent form of accommodation is of a small room shared by 6-15 girls, as is the case mainly in Calcutta and Mangalore. In Vashi, Mumbai the women in the processing units are all housed together (sometimes numbering 130-140) in large 800 ft halls. Then there are the exceptional cases where women have been provided with decent accommodation. By and large even if it is a huge hall, the fact that 100 women live together has its limitations. The place resembles a railway platform with the women huddled together with their meagre belongings. They are provided with very little furniture: it is a luxury if women have their own bedding. Most of the room is taken up by the little bags and suitcases of the women and the clothes they put out to dry for which too they have no other space.

A large hall such as the ones provided by the units can in no way be considered a place to live in. There is the problem of keeping the place neat and clean. There is the obvious lack of privacy and of course a large number of instances of interpersonal problems coming from the co-existence of such a large group having to adhere to the same time and discipline enforced at the workplace. For the girls, the lack of adequate facilities is

the cause of late arrival at the workplace in the mornings. There are times when this creates tension between the workers, as they stand to lose the day's wage as also the goodwill of the supervisors, which they can ill-afford. The other problem that came up from the women about their living arrangements is of the paucity of water. In fact, in one of the units in Goa, there was a major agitation by the workers on the issue of water facilities. They struck work to protest against the lack of water in their quarters. The stalemate was broken only after they were given assurance by the management that the needful measures would be taken immediately. In another unit in Goa, the women agitated over leaking rooms and got the management to do the needful.

The mess arrangements for women workers in the processing units: The fact that there is homogeneity in the composition of the migrant contract workers renders the management of their food arrangements at the unit easy. However, this has contributed to a diet which the women are not happy with and which by no means fulfils the nutritional requirements of the workers.

Most of the units have made various kinds of rudimentary food arrangements for their migrant women workers. Some of these are provided by the contractor who charges the expenses to the workers account, at times there are arrangements made privately at the initiative of the women themselves. In Calcutta, women were doing their own cooking in groups - either all the roommates sharing out the work or as organised by the contractor. In one unit in Calcutta, the girls were provided with rice but they made their own curries. However the quality of the food provided to the workers, by and large, is not very good or even nutritious and the workers are at times wary of eating the food provided to them. At the same time there are cases where the workers state that they get good food and in fact have better food than they would eat back home, (This was stated by the girls who work with contractor Shaji in Goa and Naser in Mangalore)

For a very rudimentary meal, the women had to pay anything between Rs 275-500 per month to the mess managing committee that was often in the hands of the supervisor or the contractor. The composition of the meal everywhere was mainly rice and sambar along with vegetables twice a day mostly. This was the general rule everywhere with an additional piece of fish once or twice a week or a fish/meat curry once or twice a month. At many a place the staple diet provided consisted of rice gruel and kadala (whole Bengal gram, a variety of pulse) and black tea in the morning. On rare occasions, women were given a grand breakfast and on most Sundays they were treated to idlis or upma for breakfast. The monotonous nature of the meal was very much on the minds of the girls. At times, when they are dissatisfied and tired with the company mess food, they resort to alternatives such as preparing fish or meat curry by pooling in money and effort. A lot of them also spent extra money to stock biscuits, bread, and other snacks to supplement their very poor fare. A number of units were not even this generous- there were strict rules forbidding women from cooking in their rooms, hence the girls had to make do with what they got or wait for their monthly/weekly visits to the market to buy their stock of goodies they craved to eat.

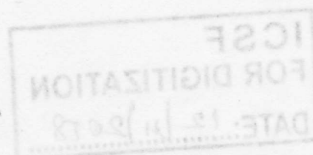
On rare occasions when units had surplus fish, some of it was given for the

workers' consumption. Then the girls were provided with a good fare. However there are occasions when, according to the women, the women smuggled out fish, with the support of the supervisor, to cook for themselves. If they were caught before the fish was cooked, they would only lose the fish but if it had already been cooked, the manager in charge of production would charge them the cost of the fish. There were times when the women were given fish that had been kept frozen for too long a time to consume but by and large most of the women found the taste unbearable and some even went on to say that they would rather have just gruel than "such iced fish that tasted foul"

Thus it appears that the system of collective messing practised by many units has its limitations. Not only does it mean loss of some part of their income on a monthly basis, it also means food that neither is found tasty by the workers nor meets their needs. At times, it also creates additional expenses, as the women pay for the mess but also make their own food as they like to. Hence all the fanfare the contractors put about as regards workers' facilities at the units is quite misleading.

The growth of the fish processing industry has primarily been export driven. Such integration of local production into the global market has changed the production process, its control and ownership, redefined the meaning and nature of work. It has created new employment opportunities for women, re-configured gender relations and weakened the traditional correlation between caste and occupation. Tradition is both transformed and reinforced, in the process. While processing fish continues to be seen as women's work, its translocation to the factory premises makes it a blue-collar job acceptable to those outside traditional fishworker communities. That women have acquired agency unavailable in the traditional setting is indisputable, but new forms of domination, gender-specific and otherwise, have been created. The new forms of oppression could be tackled by organisation and state regulation, but, by and large, are not. Upward mobility and additional agency is available to women workers who graduate to the recruiting chain but the wider ramifications of migrant work for the women's lives remain to be explored.

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