

A Platform for Action

Meeting in Mumbai, women fishworkers of the coastal districts of the Indian State of Maharashtra drew up an agenda to advocate for their rights and livelihoods

In December 2021, a dozen women from the coastal districts of the western Indian State of Maharashtra assembled in the capital, Mumbai. All experienced fishworker leaders—most of them representing the Maharashtra Machhimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS)—they had gathered to learn from one another and discuss strategies to address the challenges faced by fisherwomen and coastal fishing communities. Organized by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) Trust the meeting was hosted by the Central Institute of Fisheries Education (ICAR-CIFE) from 3 to 4 December.

Purnima Meher, vice president of MMKS and the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), and Nalini Nayak, ICSF Trustee, welcomed the participants and explained the purpose and structure of the workshop. Thereafter, the discussion proceeded to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector and its workers. The aim of the meeting was to understand how the women's livelihoods had been sustained, despite new and existing challenges. At the same time, it was important to connect their experiences in India to global trends in fisheries, the acceleration in the ocean and coastal economy, and the climate and biodiversity agenda. The outcomes of this meeting will feed into ICSF's national workshop on the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), and women in fisheries, to be held in Chennai in April 2021.

The first session kicked off with the identification of women fishworkers' concerns in the State. Participants from its five coastal districts presented accounts of the day-to-day working conditions of women in the sector, their

livelihood issues and the programmes of their organizations. The leaders largely represent women in post-harvest fisheries—ranging from fish sorting, salting, drying and processing, to auctioning and vending activities. (An estimated 77,000 women work along the fisheries value chain in the state, 70 per cent in fish marketing.) As the presentations drew out details of their fish chains, the women noted both similarities and differences in their experiences. Contexts varied greatly—from the big harbours and markets of bustling Mumbai to the distant village landing centres of the Konkan coast; and from the organized and vocal women in formal markets to the dispersed and vulnerable dry-fish vendors.

Despite their diversity, the women identified a few key issues that were relevant to a majority of fishworkers and communities. They noted the

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marginalization of women's livelihoods as a result of rapid changes in the value chain. When traditional fish landing centres were replaced by new harbours, along with the bigger boats fish merchants with deep pockets arrived on the scene. Women, if they are not organized, lose out in the auctions. In a discussion on women's access to credit and finance, the women noted the community's hardships with indebtedness. They said that large lending institutions are not the answer, instead highlighting more equitable

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A fish processor at Mumbai's Sassoon Docks. An estimated 77,000 women work along the fisheries value chain in the state of Maharashtra, 70 per cent of those in fish marketing

financial models, including through self-help groups and co-operatives, which could help fishing communities break out of the cycle of debt and poverty.

The changes in the fisheries value chain mirrored those on the coast. Discussing the tenure rights of coastal communities, the women pointed out several instances when they had lost

... fishworkers conducted a mapping of formal and informal street markets in Mumbai to demand that the city administration protect them from eviction

access to community commons, fishing grounds and livelihoods. In Mumbai and other areas, urban development has often excluded and marginalized fishing communities, as they are displaced by other more powerful economic interests, or their livelihoods are slowly choked by pollution and environmental degradation.

Customary rights are rarely recorded or recognized, including to market spaces. Although the Koli fishing communities of Mumbai have had some success in garnering visibility for the rights over their *koliwad*s (fishing hamlets), the women continue to struggle with municipal authorities to recognize their livelihoods. Their demands to improve their working conditions in formal city markets are rarely met. Similarly, they face the constant threat of being displaced from their street vending sites. In an inspiring case of the women mobilizing to safeguard their rights in 2012, fishworkers conducted a mapping of formal and informal street markets in Mumbai to demand that the city administration protect them from eviction. Discussing the mapping exercise, the women noted that now they have the aid of a national legislation for street vendors and they should ensure its implementation.

The second day opened with a Koli song describing boats going out



Participants at the Mumbai meeting in December, 2021. At the end of the meeting, the women drew up a series of demands to be addressed by their organizations at the national and sub-national levels

fishing on moonlit nights. The day's programme was split into two parts. The first was a discussion of strategies to strengthen fishworker organizations, particularly to enable women's participation in decisionmaking at the State and national levels. In the next session, the women identified the main issues that connected their struggles with the international and national legal instruments that offer pathways to redress their problems.

At the international level, they noted the SSF Guidelines, endorsed in 2014 by the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and, at the national level, the National Policy for Marine Fisheries (NPMF), 2017.

At the end of the meeting, the women drew up a series of demands to be addressed by their organizations at various levels. They demanded that women have the right of first sale of the fish landed at their beaches and harbours. This would protect their access to markets. They pointed out the urgent need to record and protect their customary use of coastal village lands for housing, fisheries livelihoods and community infrastructure. Women's access to clean and well-equipped market spaces to sell their fish should also be improved. The women discussed the importance of the Street Vendors

Act, 2014 in regulating street vendors in public areas. Highlighting the impacts of industrial pollution on the health of fishing communities and the marine environment, they noted the ongoing struggles of their organizations to draw attention to existing and emerging threats on the coast.

As the meeting concluded, the women looked to the future with resolve and decided to build on these discussions at the national level, with their partners and collaborators from India's other coastal States. ↴

For more



Report of the National Workshop: The SSF Guidelines and Mainstreaming Gender into Fisheries Policies and Legislation, Tamil Nadu, India, 2019

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/930.ICSF214.docx>

Report of the Brainstorming Session for the National Workshop on Enhancing Capacities of Women Fishworkers in India for the Implementation of the SSF Guidelines, Kerala, 2019

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/930.ICSF212.pdf>

Report on workshop on enhancing capacities of women fishworkers in India for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, Tamil Nadu, 2016

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/930.ICSF158.pdf>