

# Building solidarity

**Proceedings of a workshop held in Chennai, India, aimed at understanding challenges, finding solutions, and building solidarity among women in fisheries**

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**W**omen constitute 56 percent of the fisher population in India and yet they are often voiceless. To address the invisibility and underrepresentation of women in fisheries, a workshop was held in Chennai, India, from 8 to 10 April 2022. Titled ‘The National workshop on SSF Guidelines and Women in Fisheries, India’, the workshop was part of a process of collective action that had, just before the COVID 19 lockdown period, witnessed the creation of a Women in Fisheries Platform.

The workshop participants were mainly fish vendors but also in attendance were women from the harvesting sector, who are among the most marginalised sections in the fisheries. Women in harvesting were represented by shellfish gatherers from Palghar, Maharashtra; the ‘tiger

widows’ of Sundarbans, West Bengal; active woman fishers from West Bengal and seaweed collectors from Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu. The workshop was an attempt to build alliances between the two groups of women in fisheries – harvesters and vendors.

The workshop commenced with participants sharing their experiences on the impact of the pandemic. Two aspects were highlighted: first, the difficulties that women experienced in trying to reach markets despite possessing fish to sell, and in Kerala, the entry of men who had lost their jobs during the lockdown into fish vending spaces. Second, the reappearance of varieties of fish not seen for a long time, as mechanised fishing was put on hold during the lockdown. In addition, participants also talked about the adverse impact of the pandemic on

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Participants of women in fisheries workshop Chennai, India. Despite their enormous economic contributions to the harvest and postharvest sector, women’s participation in decision making at the local, state, and national levels is still nascent

children's education; the problems caused by coastal erosion; and the loss of coastal lands and habitation spaces due to climate impacts and harbour development.

Lila Vasant Karbhari, a shellfish gatherer from Palghar district of Maharashtra described the challenges faced by her community. These include climate change-induced unseasonal rainfall that often washes away their shellfish harvest and the difficulty finding fish to meet even home consumption needs. There are 57 villages in Palghar district and a lot of women who gather shellfish are not registered as fishers. As a result, their activities are undocumented; their work is unrecognized; and they are unable to seek compensation for losses incurred.

Purnima Meher, also from Palghar, who is a member of the organization Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samitee (MMKS) spoke about the government's apathy towards women fishers. During a recent cyclone, the Maharashtra government provided financial assistance to boat-owning fishermen. However, women fishers, vendors or collectors received not even a mention. After women began protesting, and when Jyoti Meher, secretary of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) and member of MMKS, forwarded their concerns to the central government, financial assistance for women was sanctioned. However, the scheme had conditionalities attached to it – for example, only women with licenses could access it; therefore, it excluded the majority of women vendors and all of the women who work in harvest and postharvest fisheries.

Gita Mridha, who hails from the Sundarbans in West Bengal, spoke about how her husband who collected fish, crab and honey in the Sundarbans forests was killed by a tiger, forcing her into the ranks of those known as 'tiger widows' – women who have lost their spouses in tiger attacks. Although women whose husbands have been killed in tiger/crocodile attacks are awarded Rs. 2 lakh (USD 2,544) as compensation, Gita could not avail the amount because she did not have a proper death certificate. Describing the current situation in the Sunderbans, Gita said that the core zone of the sanctuary, where fish and crabs are found, is a prohibited area. Fishers travel illegally to these core areas using dinghy boats. On the days that she manages to reach the core area, she said she may harvest up to two kilos of crab and fish. Gita has played a leadership role in the community and helped to establish the Tiger Widow Mahila Samiti in Gosaba block, which has 15 women members. The organization travels out to other blocks to bring other 'tiger widows' (over 3000 in number) into its fold. They plan to reach out to the government in order to secure better compensation.

Hailing from the Southern Province of Tamil Nadu, Meenachi, a seaweed collector from Ramanathapuram, was around eleven years old when she began collecting seaweed. She was married by the time she was 16. Since her husband did not provide for the family and there were children to bring up, Meenachi—one of many such women—would go to sea, earn Rs. 100-150 (USD 1-2) a day and somehow manage to run the household. There would be six or seven women in a boat as well as one man. In those days, there were no regulations on seaweed collection. She would leave her children with her mother for four or five days and go to the nearby islands to collect seaweed. She was always keen to educate her children with her earnings. Today her daughter is pursuing a master's degree. She said that the last two years were hard. She couldn't go out to work during the lockdowns, and there was no income to support the household. Just like fishers, seaweed collectors also could not work during the ban period. Unlike fishers though, they did not receive support. Meenachi felt that there should be some provision made to enable seaweed collectors like herself who have no other means of income to access alternate livelihoods and opportunities during ban periods.

The workshop also addressed the needs and challenges of the women in fisheries post-harvest. 75 per cent of fish marketing and 90 per cent of all processing is done by women. However, their basic needs and rights have fallen on deaf ears for decades.

Women across provinces said that they lack access to dedicated market areas. They are being pushed out of formal spaces and forced into street vending. In places like Mumbai, 'redevelopment' is used as an excuse to displace women from their vending spaces in traditional markets. Amutha, a fish vendor from Chennai in Tamil Nadu recounted that the market space that women fish vendors like her used, was demolished to widen a road. They were promised an alternative dedicated market space, which is however yet to materialize. Another speaker was Ujwala Patil, an organizer from Maharashtra, who is trying to bring together women whose markets have been displaced. Her organization has also been training women to distribute fish directly to customers using scooters. Despite concerted attempts to gain social security for women fish vendors, they have met with little success. Most fish markets have poor facilities and are in dire need of renovation. They lack clean and hygienic bathrooms, potable water, and lighting. Dedicated market spaces with basic infrastructure are urgently needed.

The workshop also brought to light the biases and hardships that women face when they try to avail compensation for losses incurred due to cyclones, floods, and other disasters.

**'The workshop attempted to ... build alliances and foster solidarity among women fishworkers for a more resilient tomorrow.'**





Women's panel discussion. The workshop also brought to light the biases and hardships that women face when they try to avail compensation for losses incurred due to cyclones, floods, and other disasters

Women vendors and harvesters demanded that, just like men, they too should be compensated during lean periods and for injuries caused by fisheries-related activities. The demand was echoed by the other groups present at the workshop, including the 'tiger widows' from the Sundarbans and the seaweed gatherers of Ramanathapuram.

During the course of the workshop, the women in fisheries group put forward several interesting suggestions and action points. First, they suggested that all women fish harvesters must be recognized and documented. Their economic contribution to fish harvesting also needs to be recognized. In order to improve the livelihoods of women in fisheries, women-specific fisher collectives are needed that prioritize and directly benefit fisherwomen. Women fish vendors' rights to market spaces must be protected and market redevelopment undertaken only in consultation with their representatives. They also demanded that spaces for women street fish vendors be made secure and that the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihoods and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 be strictly implemented. In Kerala, the women have demanded that market committees and harbour management committees should have women representatives from fishing communities.

All the input sessions and discussions led to developing a workshop statement and

building the Women in Fisheries Platform. The workshop provided information that will no doubt enable women fishers to intervene more effectively at community-level meetings. The process of sharing information, good practices, and experiences through forums such as the Women's Platform led to strengthening the collective voice of the participants. The workshop statement concisely put forth the needs of the fishing community at large and of women in fisheries in particular. It called for developing national guidelines for Small-scale fisheries and a national policy for women in fisheries, with wider consultation and participation of fishers and fishworkers at various levels. The Women in Fisheries platform would function as a joint forum of different groups with similar needs. It was unanimously decided that the platform would be called 'National Platform for Women in Small Scale Fisheries', NPWSSF in short, and that it would work towards strengthening the position of women in fisheries.

Gender equality is still a distant dream in the fisheries. Despite their enormous economic contributions to the harvest and postharvest sector, women's participation in decision making at the local, state, and national levels is still nascent. The workshop attempted to set right this imbalance and to build alliances and foster solidarity among women fishworkers for a more resilient tomorrow. ❏