

FILM

**The Unseen Faces, Unheard Voices: Women and Aquaculture
(English and Bengali with English subtitles; 21mins 37 secs)**

**A film by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers
(ICSF) Trust**

By **Sokha Eng** (Sokha. Eng001@umb.edu),
Ph.D. Candidate,
University of
Massachusetts,
Boston, US



‘We Bengalis like rice and fish the most as a meal. We can’t live without fish and rice. It is only after eating them that we feel satisfied’. Fish and rice are a vital part of the daily diet of Bengali communities. The documentary ‘The Unseen Face, Unheard Voice: Women and Aquaculture’ shows the impacts of aquacultural practices on the well-being of women in rural communities in West Bengal, India. The film highlights women’s reliance on fresh water in their backyard ponds for their household uses (such as washing, cleaning, and watering vegetables), on the small fish in these ponds as a source of nutrition, and on locally grown rice and vegetables in their diet. However, the growing practice of fish culture has limited women’s access to these resources. Small sized fish is less available as the farming of larger fish, which is often cooked and served to men first in the family, is becoming the norm.

In order to meet the demand for fish and shrimp, the government of West Bengal encouraged aquaculture practices through different initiatives. The local communities started to convert their agricultural lands to freshwater fishponds. The practice changed land use and reduced employment opportunities for women in agriculture. The film highlights the inequality of access to employment in aquaculture between men and women. While the practice of fish culture has created more jobs in the fishponds, the employment typically benefits men, not women. The pond owners employ men

to fix nets, feed and administer fish medicine. A woman cannot work with a group of men. The gender division of labor and restrictive social norms prevent women from accessing the benefits of the Government’s aquacultural initiatives.

Small farmer women with limited resources and lands take far longer to raise fish as compared to big farmers with large ponds. When there are floods, small farmers, many of whom have taken loans or leased their lands to invest in aquaculture, fall into a debt trap. The entry of shrimp processing plants into areas close to communities has opened up jobs for many women; however, they have had to contend with workplace abuse and harassment rampant in these jobs.

As more and more land previously used to grow rice and vegetables is now dedicated to shrimp and spawn ponds, the quality of land is deteriorating. The use of modern fertilizers damages both land and water. Land available for agriculture is shrinking; together with the degradation of land quality, this has resulted in rice shortages, and consequently, the price of rice, now imported from outside the state, has been steadily rising. Moreover, there is less fresh water available for household use and women have to travel long distances to fetch water.

The film also highlights a government initiative which supports women’s self-help groups by providing training on how to manage ponds, including cleaning, checking water quality, and harvesting fish. The film highlights the success stories of women entrepreneurs in fish culture. However, all farm owners tend to employ male workers and the success of women entrepreneurs does not necessarily translate to employment benefits for other women.

The documentary brings out the complex reality of women’s lives and the impact of government’s initiatives on their well-being. It serves to remind policymakers and relevant stakeholders how important it is to keep gender and inequality perspectives at the heart of policy making to ensure the well-being of local communities.

To view the documentary, please visit:

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/unseen-faces-unheard-voices-women-and-aquaculture-purba-medinipur-west-bengal/>



PUBLISHED BY
the International Collective
in Support of Fishworkers Trust
22 First Floor,
Venkatrathinam Nagar, Adyar,
Chennai 600 020, India
Tel: (91) 44 2445 1216
Fax: (91) 44 2445 0216
E-mail: icsf@icsf.net
Website: www.icsf.net

EDITED BY
Nilanjana Biswas

DESIGNED BY
M.S. Vasanth Christopher

Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 2000 words. They could deal with

issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a

recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.