

Asia/ Pakistan

A bleak future

Women of fishing communities in Pakistan face increasing marginalization

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In Pakistan, fishing communities are considerably more liberal than their agrarian counterparts. In earlier times communal property was the norm and personal property was almost unheard of in fishing communities. There was no gender discrimination and women were the virtual heads of the family, responsible for distributing the harvest. Unlike in other rural communities, there was no 'veil system', and women enjoyed a lot of freedom.

As men spent more time fishing, women had a greater role in family matters and in dealing with problems of the family. In fact several women of fishing communities developed reputations of being the chief of not only the family but also of the locality or caste group. People, including men, were identified by the names of their mothers, not their fathers—a practice that still continues in fishing communities. Similarly, some caste groups engaged in fisheries are also named after women. Even Karachi—the metropolitan coastal city of Pakistan and the provincial headquarter of Sindh province—was named after a woman called Mai Kalochi, who was the chieftain of this small fishing village of earlier times. It is said that she herself used to run the fishing business and engage in other trade.



Presently, however, two trends can be discerned. While traditional fishing communities still tends to be liberal *vis-à-vis* women, this is not the case with the large number of agricultural communities who now derive their livelihood from the fisheries, following their displacement from agricultural activities in the Indus deltaic area. Agricultural societies have usually been rigid with regard to the accepted roles of women. Women tend to be considered as a commodity whose ownership rests with the male and are often confined within the four-walls of the house in the name of morality and decency. Many of these values have now also been transmitted to fishing communities.

Women in fishing

In the past the women often accompanied their male family members on fishing trips. There was no major division of work. The fishermen would take the entire family to fishing trips to remote islands, where they would all engage in fishing as well as in cleaning and drying fish. In the case of big nets men and women would jointly throw the net in the water and pull it back. Back in the village women would sell the fish in local as well as in distant markets while the men would continue to fish.

In cases where men left for longer fishing trips of ten to twenty days, women would stay home and continue to fish on a smaller scale in shallow coastal waters. In the coastal regions of Sindh province, women fished with nets in creeks off the coast. However, with the commercialization of fisheries and the entry of outsiders (non-indigenous fishermen) into the fisheries, women were gradually pushed out of fishing activities. With the industrialization process, fishing no longer remains a family-based activity in Pakistan and the role of women of fishing communities within the family unit has almost come to an end.

Women as net weavers

In the sub-continent women of pre-historic times are said to have been the architects of fishing nets, baskets, etc. The earliest nets were made of fibre collected from the jungle. Cotton thread was introduced at a later stage. Even after women of fishing communities more or less withdrew from active fishing and focused more on the home, they continued to make fishing nets.

This brought in a steady income. Women who wove nets were paid for it, even within their own families. Women earned a stable and regular, if modest, income. Earnings depended on the complexity, strength, and

weight of the net. When nets were made exclusively of cotton thread, women earned between Rs 5 to 10 per day. The currency then had a very high purchasing power. Income was steady, as work was always available. Buyers of fishing nets gave work to women on a piecemeal basis. Many sections of nets were then pieced together to make a larger net.

However, after the late 1960s, processes of modernization began to affect women net-weavers adversely, ousting them from this profession in the same way as they were ousted from fishing activities. This began with the import of nylon nets into Pakistan. Later factories were set up in Karachi for the manufacture of nylon fishing nets. These nets quickly started replacing the traditional cotton nets, and, as a result, the demand for cotton nets started dwindling, depriving a large number of women net weavers from this source of their livelihood. The governments of the time never gave it a thought or even considered creating alternative means of income for the affected women.

By the early 1970s women had effectively been thrown out of the net weaving business. Today few of the present generation have any memories of their womenfolk working as skilled, paid craftswomen fashioning fine fishing nets. The impacts of the nylon net on fishing communities are multidimensional. Women have been particularly adversely affected as this income-earning activity came to a standstill.

Post-harvest activities

Women have always been involved with post-harvest activities such as drying and cleaning fish. Women have also been working in fishmeal plants, producing fishmeal or powder sold to poultry farms. They have been involved in processing crabs for export. Crabs are caught from the foot of the mangroves and are kept in baskets covered with mangrove leaves, till they are processed. This involves boiling them, extracting the meat, putting this into plastic bags in ice. Women would extract the meat while the men would fill the bags for freezing.

However, jobs of local women in fish processing factories and fish cleaning sheds have been taken over by the arrival of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Burma. Desperate for work, the immigrants are even willing to work for half the wage, outside the terms of formal employment. Illegal immigrants who have settled along the coastal areas of Karachi have

thus affected the earnings of women of local fishing communities.

The role of the government

With the decline in their economic roles within the fisheries, the status and clout of women of fishing communities has decreased. Women no longer manage the business as they once did. A very small number of local women are involved in peeling shrimps, weaving nets, making fish baskets, etc. as wage labourers. Their economic condition has deteriorated and poverty has become endemic.

The government has pursued no policies or programmes to improve the socio-economic condition of women of fishing communities. The complete lack of acknowledgement of the role of women in the fisheries sector can be judged from the fact that women of fishing communities have not found even a single mention in government policy documents, laws and rules etc. The Handbook of Fisheries Statistics of Pakistan—the annual publication of Pakistan's Marine Fisheries Department last published in 1993—for example, has no mention of women, even though it carries a full chapter on the fishermen population.

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