

# **Voices of the Marginalised**

**A successful story of Karaikal Federation**

**Joining hands and fighting for rights**

**SNEHA**  
Nagapattinam

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## **Voices of the Marginalised**

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## **DEDICATION**



**(Late) Ms. V. Vellaiyammal**

Birth: 05.08.1949

Demise: 04.11.2005

*We dedicate this publication to our  
former President of the Karikal Federation*



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Karaikal District Fisher women Federation was facilitated to bring into its fold the members of all sangams. Federations are the Community Based Organizations that have emerged as the formalized Institutional mechanisms to facilitate women's political participation and move towards gender equality in all spheres of their lives. It has become the fall back structure for women in distress especially single women. Its members are sharing the journey of the federation towards their ideological and economic empowerment.

Federation enables fisher women to address their problems from micro level to macro level. Federations have emerged as a forum to fight for the rights of the fisher people, to demand the basic amenities in the fishing villages and to enforce gender justice among the fisher people. Independently and collectively women are able to make decisions in governance from the family to the Panchayat level.

In this publication we have documented the history, achievements and challenges of the federation. The profiles of some of the members have been documented and analyzed to highlight the impacts of the federation on their lives in terms of gender relationship and gender norms. We are of hope that their profiles provide us the coping mechanisms at times of distress and positive affirmation for collective action to bring changes.

We sincerely extend our thanks to the members of Karaikal District fisher women federation who had faith in the team for sharing their life experiences with us in the context of tsunami.

Our special thanks are due to Ms. Gandimathi for reviewing and editing this report and Ms. Revathi who documented the case studies.

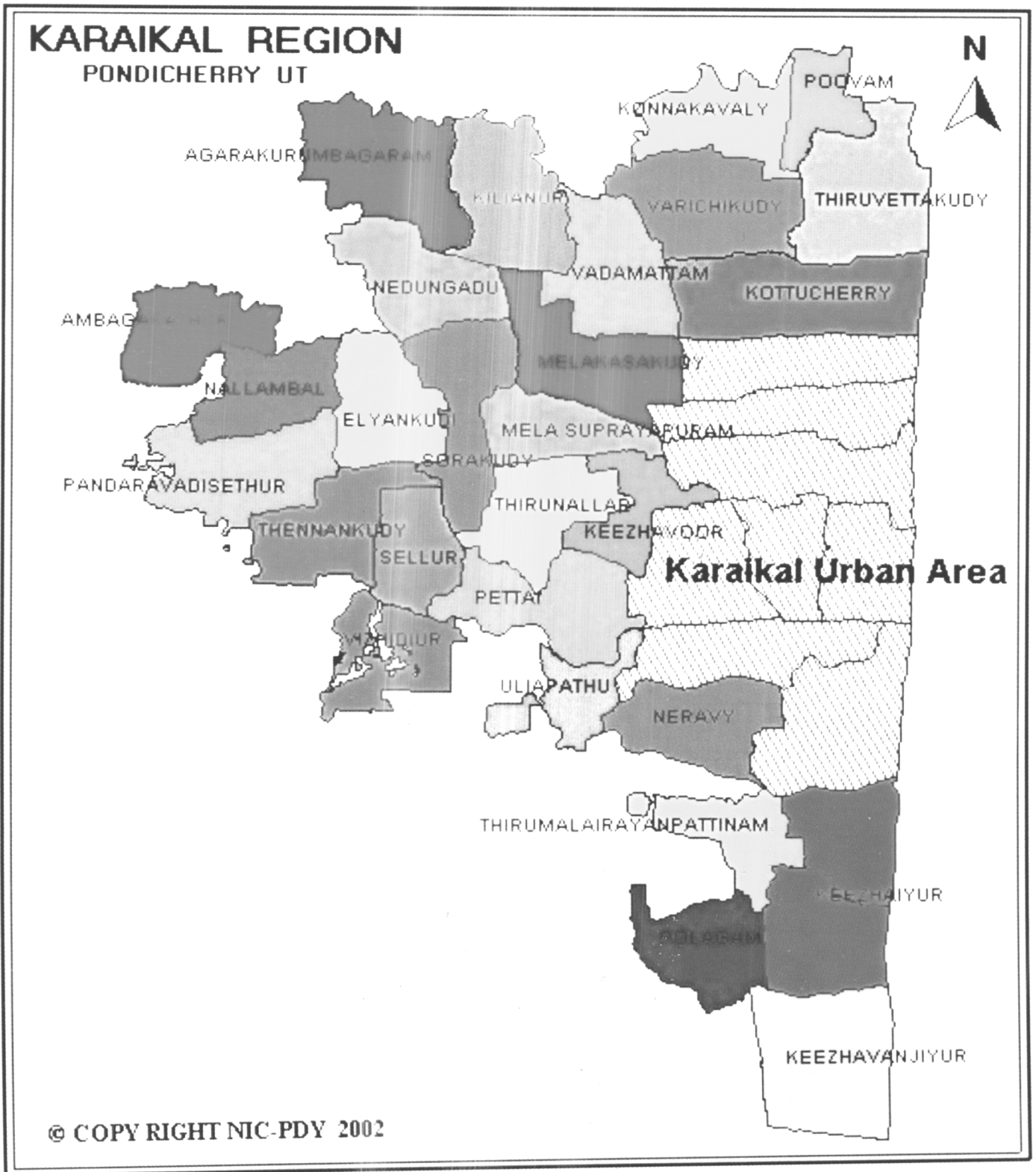
We express our sincere thanks to Ms. P. Vanaja for her valuable support and coordination and the SNEHA's field team in Karaikal especially to Ms. A. Indirani and Ms. R. Vijayarani.

We extend our appreciation to Ms. R. Shanthi, Mr. P. Sankar, Ms. P. Selvahemavathi and team members for their valuable support in designing and pagination of the report.

We thankfully acknowledge the financial support of Swiss Red Cross and Swiss Solidarity Alliance for helping us to undertake this study.

**Jesu Rethinam,**  
**Director,**  
**SNEHA.**

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## Introduction

### Profile of the Karaikal District

The Union Territory of Pondicherry constituted out of the four erstwhile French establishments of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam. Karaikal region though affiliated to Pondicherry State is situated in between the two regions of Nagappattinam District of Tamil Nadu State.

**Latitude:** lies between 10 49' and 11 01' northern latitude about 150 kms. **Longitude:** lies between 79 43' and 79 52' eastern longitude about 150 kms.

**Area:** The district constitutes an area of 161 sq. km. with the population of 1,70,640 as per the 2001 census. Karaikal town about 16 km. north of Nagappattinam and 9 km. south of Tharangambadi is the regional headquarters. Karaikal region is made up of the Commune Panchayats of *Karaikal, Kottuchcheri, Nedungadu, Tirunallar, Niravi* and *Tirumalarajanpattinam*.

**Topography:** Forming part of the fertile Cauveri delta by a thick mantle of alluvium of variable thickness, the region is completely covered by the distributaries of Cauveri. The north of the region is flat having a gentle slope towards the Bay of Bengal in the east. It is limited on the north by the Nandalar and on the south-east by the Vettar. The group of rocks known as Cuddalore formations is met with in the area contiguous to Karaikal region in Nagappattinam District.

**Population:** Karaikal has the least number of houses per square mile showing the less congested nature among the rural areas of the Territory. The population of women is more than the population of men.

Year	Persons	Maies	Females
2001	170,640	84,365	86,275

**Language:** This Union Territory has a very interesting language composition. This is primarily due to the scattered location of the regions. However, Karaikal being surrounded by Tamil Nadu, the dominant language is TAMIL.

**Religion:** Karaikal has only three major religious communities.

*Coastal habitats  
and resources are  
vital in stabilizing  
the shorelines,  
protecting the coast  
from the  
natural disasters  
and coastal zones  
support the livelihood  
needs and  
basic food needs of the  
coastal community.*

**Hinduism:** Hindus form the largest religious community in this region. (According to the 1961 Census, 75.37% are Hindus in Karaikal).

**Christianity:** Christians constitute at 10.75% (1961 Census) of the total population in Karaikal.

**Islam:** Karaikal has the highest percentage of muslim population in the Union Territory of Pondicherry. Most of the muslims in Karaikal belong to the Sufi sect. A great majority of the muslims in Karaikal follow the Sufi school of ritual and dogma.

**Fisheries:** Karaikal region has 10 fishing hamlets and about 2500 fishermen families with 24 Kms. of coastal area. Smaller number are engaged in pisciculture in perennial tanks and ponds. Karaikal is situated in the richest coastal periphery of Nagapattinam District for sea fisheries.

### **Political Economy of the Coastal Zones**

Dynamic and complex interactions of the marine, terrestrial and atmospheric environments are evident in the coastal zone, with water being the factor unifying the terrestrial and marine ecosystem. The coastal zone in Tamil Nadu is characterized by a rich diversity of natural habitats, such as coastal and mangrove forests, coral reefs flats / fringes / barriers, beaches, continental shelf areas, sand dunes, grasslands, marsh lands, rocky shores, flood plains, salt marshes, estuaries, mudflats, wetlands, sea grass beds and seaweed areas. A variety of natural resources, exist including corals, cowry shells, seaweeds and algae, fish, shrimp and other aquatic life, plants and minerals. These are important for the existence of coastal communities. Coastal habitats and resources are also vital because of their role in stabilizing the shorelines, and in protecting coastal areas and habitations from cyclones, tidal waves and other natural disasters. The coastal ecosystem is fragile, unique and complex. Coastal zones support a majority of the world's populations such as those relating to agriculture, fishing, fish drying and processing, salt extraction and production, shell collection, etc., are integrated with this eco-system.



However industrial activities like rare earth mining, mining of corals, limestone and beach sand, groundwater extraction, land reclamation, plantation and afforestation, oil exploration and extraction, aquaculture, transport highways, tourism and recreation, farm houses, real estate development, highway road projects, chemical and power industries, hotels, defense and nuclear establishments, ship breaking yards, wind mill farms, discharge of urban sewage and other effluents, construction and dredging of ports and harbors and military and naval bases are the major cause for the destruction of the coast – its ecology and livelihood systems in Tamil Nadu. These activities deplete and destroy natural resources and habitats and interfere with the processes occurring naturally in the coastal zone. They are also commercial and profit – oriented in nature which require substantial acquisition and privatization of common resources, thus leading to deprivation and poverty and loss of control over coastal peoples' traditional livelihood, since local communities are either displaced, or their access to hitherto common resources is limited or alienated from them.

#### **Coastal Zone and the Fishing Community**

For the fishing communities fishing is a way of life, not just a source of income. Traditionally, small scale or artisan fishers have provided fish for local consumption, but as fish becomes scarce, its value increases; it enters the global market and become unaffordable to common human being. Fish is a vital part of our diet, providing essential protein, vitamins and minerals. In the globalization process, the fishing communities are displaced and the MNCs take over completely. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), every year governments worldwide pay US\$ 116 billion to catch \$70 billion worth fish.

The Government of India has also entered into the Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with European Countries, Asian Countries and some South East Asian Countries for the import of five thousand items which obviously include forty varieties of fish. FTAs are expected to come into force before December 2008.

The European Union has around 40% more vessels, which have depleted all the oceans in the world displacing the fishing communities all over the world depending on these life resources. In addition to this resource depletion, importing subsidized fish means the destruction of the livelihood of millions of Indians

*Industrial activities  
deplete and destroy  
natural resources,  
habitats, leading to  
poverty and loss of  
traditional livelihood .*

*By allowing  
import of fish we are  
selling the fish  
industry  
to Transnational  
Corporations  
and marginalizing the  
fishworkers mainly  
women workers.*

involved in the small-scale, cottage fish industry and its marketing, resulting in the displacement of people, particularly women who are engaged in marketing. Lakhs of people are involved in processing the fish, transporting it to other locales and markets for its wholesale and retail trade. The fish workers will lose their right to decide the price of their produce. This will invariably result in the displacement of the 10 million fish workers in this country. Now by allowing import we are going to sell out our fish industry to the Transnational Corporations.

Issues of coastal area degradation and management are intricately linked to the concerns of the fishing community. There are some management concerns stemming from within the fishery sector. There are, at the same time, management issues, which are, generated outside the fisheries sector but which nevertheless impact on it. Fisheries departments have not traditionally addressed these issues. These include pollution from various industrial, agricultural, municipal and other sources; destruction of fish habitats, such as through mangrove destruction, dredging, land reclamation, diversion of river waters and resultant salinity changes, siting of mega industrial and infrastructure projects along the coast, loss of customary rights over coastal space, an issue that has been addressed by fish worker organizations. Increasingly, fishing communities are losing their rights to space on land and in the sea. One of the main victims of development has been the invaluable wetland. Wetlands are assets that produce various types of wealth that are valued by society. For e.g. Habitats of fish, birds, and other biota, that is directly or indirectly valued by society. Lakhs of people of the fishing community depend on wetlands. Further, with regard to the fishing community and coastal protection there is a direct relationship between industrial aquaculture and industrial fishery both of which are destructive of the ocean wealth and the coast and must be prohibited.

### **Role of Women in Fisheries**

**As far as pre-harvesting is concerned, women have been active in**

- Net making (India).
- Net mending (India, Thailand, Philippines and Spain).
- Preparing of hook and lines (Thailand and Philippines).

**In harvest activities, women have been**

- Cultivating and collecting sea weeds (all countries).
- Netting and angling in back waters, ponds and lakes for household consumption (India, Philippines).
- Some have been going to sea as helpers.

**In post-harvest activities, women have been involved in the**

- Offloading.
- Processing (sun and wind drying, sorting, cleaning, cutting etc.).
- Marketing, especially for local markets. In all countries except France and Spain women dominate among street hawkers and market vendors.

With industrialisation of fisheries in India, women's role in pre-harvest activities is largely eliminated as net making is mechanised, though some mending work remains. With increase in industrial fishing and long distance fishing, the women become 'housewives' or work in other jobs. With trade becoming long distance and export oriented, women are marginalised in the marketing. Few are retailers of wholesalers. As processing becomes industrialised, women are employed in cutting, cleaning and packing, but processing and marketing get separated. The working condition in such processing plants and activities like prawn peeling are often in violation of labour laws. This employment appears separate from fishing as an activity within a specified eco-system. Similar problems arise where women are engaged in collecting fingerlings (for aquaculture), in pond culture.

With fisheries becoming more export oriented and industrialised, women loose more and more control over resources as innovations are aimed at men. Privatisation of wetland and inland waters occur, women loose access to the commons. Salt for processing and firewood for smoking are hard to come by and women are pushed out of the marketing. Tourism displaces artisan fisheries in general, and women on the shore in particular. Traditional processing gets displaced by icing, canning and shelving. Trading companies and processing factories take over

*Industrialisation of fisheries have resulted in marginalisation of women from marketing and traditional processing. Women loose control over means of production.*

and employ women on contract under exploitative conditions. Women loose control over means of production in fisheries.

The underlying assumption is that women are anyway housewives and supplementary earners and that the future of the sector can be safeguarded by 'development' in the form of technology and profit orientation aimed at the male 'bread winners' and 'heads of the household' with some 'supplementary' income generation for women. This destroys the option of seeing women as central guardians of social cohesion, food security and ecological balance, role that they have traditionally played. Women are offered some sops and safety nets, but their political role in creating alternatives is denied.

One conceptualisation that is of crucial importance is that of the production of life and livelihood. This concept tries to bridge, in a feminist perspective, the dichotomy between production and reproduction. In the conventional Marxist conceptualisation production consists mainly of producing goods for exchange in the market, realizing surplus value and profit. Production of use values for direct consumption comes under household labour and therefore falls into the sphere of reproduction. The feminist conceptualisation of Production of life perceives that the direct production of life itself, and the sustenance of life by producing use values is the base of all extended production and cannot be separated from it. This conceptualisation is particularly useful in fisheries as it connects the production of life in the fishing community directly with the demand for a right to a substantial share of the catch for the sustenance of the fishing community. It thus connects the basic needs of the artisan community with an ecologically viable perspective of nurture fisheries, which safeguard the marine life and the life of the world, and culture of the coastal people. In this perspective, nurture fisheries cannot be confused with shrimp aquaculture because aquaculture clearly serves profit maximisation and export interests and is ecologically unsustainable and destructive of community life.

It may be necessary to point out that the underlying assumption in this conceptualisation is not that women are "natural" nurturers. However, it cannot be denied that in any of the country situations

*There is  
no dichotomy  
between production and  
reproduction in fisheries  
sector. Production of  
life is directly linked to  
right to substantial  
share in the catch for  
the sustenance of  
fishing communities.*

under review women of the fishing community are doing the major part of the housework and child care and are therefore directly affected if fisheries policies turn to export orientation and neglect local food security. However, this leads to different results in different situations. Where women are still located in the artisan sector, they tend to be a strong force to defend this sector. Where women have been marginalised by industrial fisheries, they tend to appeal to the welfare state for support while they spend less energy to look into the connection between destructive technology, over fishing and depletion of fish stock. However, here we see a difference between country situations depending on their relationship to economic power blocs like the EU, where artisan fisheries have been destroyed, women can also be co-opted into aquaculture for sheer survival (as has partly happened in the Philippines). Where women work in industrial processing, their link with the fisheries sector as a whole tends to be weak. (Nalini Nayak and Gabriele Dietrich Globalisation and its impact on women in fisheries 1999, Samudra special edition 2001). In Tamilnadu, women were not yet coopted within the Industrial profit oriented shrimp culture as they were in the forefront of the struggle against shrimp industries.

### Specific Issues

Fish vending is a difficult occupation. Women fish vendors identify the following as their main problems as scarcity of fish, escalating prices, lack of capital and high rates of interest charged by money lenders, entry of big merchants (male) with ready capital and own vehicles, iced fish from other States and stiff competition. In the process, small vendors are marginalised or ousted, especially from harbours.

Since life in the fishing villages is very precarious and basic amenities are few, the time spent at home is not one of relaxation or rest for the women. They have to fetch water, do all the household chores and attend to the needs of their children and husbands. Because of the destructive industries like shrimp and petro-chemical industries along the coast even these resources like water and fuel are becoming scarce, as they are either polluted or destroyed.

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*Harbour based  
fisheries  
slowly will eliminate  
traditional  
fisheries sector in the  
context of  
user rights of  
aquatic resources.*

Women too engage in a variety of fish-related tasks. They are more engaged in drying, curing and vending, marketing, including auctioning and purchasing at big fish landing centers. The women had earlier auctioned the fish their husbands brought back. Today, they have been completely marginalised in this work because of the centralised landing and bulk purchase for export marketing. Today, hundreds of young women and girls from the fishing villages are migrating for work as wage labour in the fish processing plants. Earlier, young women worked in the saltpans. Today, they are being displaced by the shrimp farms.

The impact of destructive development projects on local communities has also been devastating. In most of the cases the landing sites, housing sites, common grassing lands for the cattle have been literally bulldozed out of existence by the investors. In other cases, traditional ways of life have been destroyed by the collapse of environmental amenities on which they depend. Salinisation of ground water has rendered fields infertile and contaminated drinking water. The destruction of mangroves and associated fish breeding and nursery areas have affected fish catches, and organic pollution and use of pesticides have brought disease.

All these have created insurmountable hardships to the women's lives. The fisheries sector itself is losing out and becoming marginalised in the context for use rights of aquatic resources. The other resource uses are gaining priority over fisheries. In particular, industrial and domestic pollution is degrading the fisheries habitat and there is an increasing competition for space and tourism projects, offshore mineral extraction and land reclamation projects, intensive aquaculture which degrade the environment, destroy shoreline ecosystem.

Wherever the right to life & livelihood issue, which is a human issue as a negative consequence of aquaculture is raised, fish workers are portrayed as destroyers for over fishing using over efficiency technologies. Often the deeper causes of too much technology and too many commercial interests destroying too many marine ecosystems are not taken into account or analysed. Industrial Aquaculture and other development projects along the coast are promoted as export industries and the myth is that they

will mitigate rural poverty. In reality they have created new levels of impoverishment and feminisation of suffering.

### **The Fisher people of Karaikal**

The fisherpeople of coastal Karaikal are like fisher people elsewhere homogenous and live with a strong community organization. A predominantly middle level boat owners and numerous labourers live in the stretch. This small district of the Pondicherry State is tucked in between two portions of the Nagapattinam district. Made into 11 fishing villages ranging from the very small ones to the sprawling ones like Karaikalmedu the fisherpeople of Karaikal are more aware of their rights and issues due to being part of a union territory and as a small state for a long time. A smaller administrative unit for long has also meant slightly better amenities and a deeper presence of the government in the villages of Karaikal in comparison to the neighbouring fishing villages in Tamilnadu.

Nevertheless there are issues galore, which affect the fisherpeople in general, and the women in particular which we will see in detail later. Of the larger issues which have affected the community as a whole the issue of indiscriminate shrimp farming which came into Tamilnadu two decades ago, the Asian tsunami which rendered to rubbles the whole coast of Tamilnadu with its severest attack on Nagapattinam and Pondicherry are the major ones. Lined up between these two catastrophes are coastal industries, coastal tourism, cordoning of shore for oil exploration which all affect the livelihood of the fisher people who are one of the very few remaining independent traditionally surviving communities. They infact are remnants of a very ancient civilization, a way of living where labour get profit directly.

Fighting the vagaries of life and challenging death in its eyes everyday the fisher people have a sturdy and stubborn nature which could be problematic in the areas of gender equality but are amazing qualities in facing uncertainties of season and nature driven livelihood.

*Industrial  
projects including  
aquaculture  
have not mitigated  
poverty  
but created  
new levels of  
impoverishment and  
feminisation of  
suffering.*



*All fisher women  
are fishworkers and  
there is no fish  
without women.  
Their role is  
crucial in  
pre and post harvest  
activities.*

### **The Fisher Women of Karaikal:**

Cocooned in their homes where the man decides and born into communities where almost everything about the women's lives are determined by a few old fashioned strong men of the community. The fisher women of Karaikal are however an example to the undaunted spirit which can cross any obstacle. Mostly illiterate and conditioned by ages of female submissivity into a voiceless existence within the confines of a kitchen and the sea shore these women have through their federation realized some of the hardest tasks even hard core feminist struggles would shudder at. They have questioned traditions squarely in its face but without breaking up the engagement they have with the community and the family.

#### ***All fisher women are fish workers***

While a sizeable chunk of them go out to sell fish in streets, markets, etc., everyone else also works right from the wee hours collecting fish from their boats and selling them to agents, to auction the fish to companies, and almost every other sphere of work that goes into getting the fish from the shore into an edible eatable on your table in myriad forms.

#### ***There is no fish without women***

Unlike the very male vision of the fishing industry which everyone has based on the fact that only men go into the sea to catch fish (Which again is a manifestation of the patriarchal banning of women's entry into the sea in the name of purity in the form of age old customs) the women are a crucial part of the fishing industry as they are involved in all the work in both pre harvest and the post harvest, which are crucial for the industry.



## *Profile of* SNEHA

**S**NEHA was the initiative of **Christy**, an educated member of the fishing community who ventured to work for the oppressed fisher people in the coastal areas of Nagapattinam and Karaikal districts since 1984. SNEHA is a registered Society under Societies Act with 19 general body members, of whom 6 are women and 9 managing committee members of whom 3 are women.

Vision of SNEHA is to work towards a caste-less, creedless, classless, gender equal and just society with a healthy environment through social transformation with peoples' participation.

It was a small beginning with few villages in 1984 when SNEHA with very few staff established its footings with the fisher people. SNEHA adopted the following strategies to empower fisher people:

1. Empowerment of fisher people with special emphasis on women through people's democratic organisations.
2. Ensuring education for children in fishing community.
3. Campaign for the Protection of Coastal Environment

Following Tsunami, SNEHA revisited its Mission statement to be inclusive in its approach and reformulated as "to facilitate the mobilization of unorganized and marginalised workers in fishery and its allied sectors especially women, children, dalit, minorities and other marginalized sections in order to protect and promote their livelihood rights and right to water and coastal resources by promoting a State with a participatory consultative and inclusive system of governance through education, training, research, lobbying and advocacy interventions".

In order to pursue this SNEHA actively engaged itself with networks such as Campaign Against Child Labour, Campaign Against Sex Selective Abortion, Campaign for un-organised workers, Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Social Development, TN Forces, Coastal Action Network, Campaign for the Protection of Water Resources and Alliance for the Release of Innocent Fishermen. Besides, Campaign Against Shrimp Industries

### SNEHA

*envisages to  
promote a society which  
ensures equality  
without any  
discrimination based on  
class, caste and gender  
and a State with  
participatory,  
consultative and  
inclusive system of  
governance and ensures  
the protection of  
environment.*

(CASI) was initiated and facilitated by SNEHA with other organisations to build a strong people's network.

With a committed team of staff and support from various segments of the society, SNEHA has established 232 sangams in 51 villages in the above districts with the total membership of 4141 members as on June 2003 in which there are 111 males and 4030 female members. When tsunami hit Tamilnadu on December 26, 2004, the whole of SNEHA constituency was devastated. Some of SNEHA staff members and SHG members and community leaders were among those who lost their lives. At present SNEHA has 639 women sangams in 51 villages with 11,519 women members.

## *The Karaikal Federation*

### **Need for a federation**

The need for a Federation is to create federation of Sangams, to facilitate the interaction among far flung Sangams, to take up common issues like the multifaceted problems in the fish vending trade and to take up need based sectoral issues and gender issues.

Federation of Sangams enable fisher people to address their problems at Taluk level and at the District level. Federations have emerged as a forum to fight for the rights of the fisher people, to demand the basic amenities in the fishing villages and to enforce gender justice among the fisher people. Independently and collectively women are able to make decisions in governance from the family to the Panchayat level. Women could secure equal access with men in economic activities. Panchayat leaders have accepted decisions and suggestions of women in Panchayat meetings. Federations have enabled SNEHA to organise fisher women under cooperatives and trade union.

### **History of Karaikal Federation**

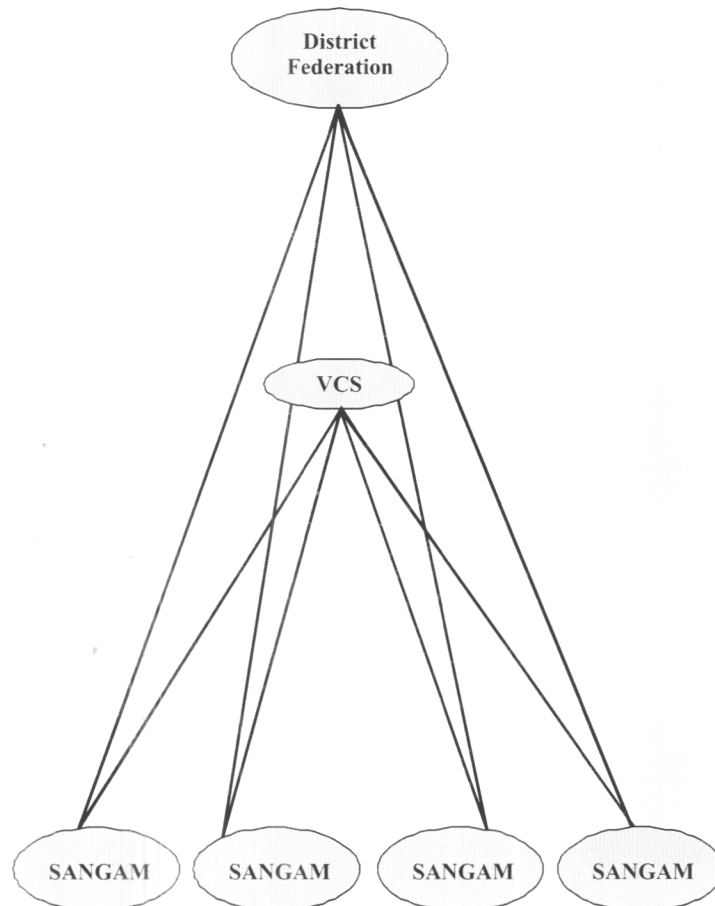
The BDOs of the Karaikal District administration were given the task of forming sangams under DRDA programmes to secure economic empowerment of women. The first Sangam was started in the year 1981 at Kilinjalmedu village. But it became inactive over a period of time. In 1985 it was registered as a Sangam again. In between in 1983 the Karaikalmedu village formed a Sangam. It was in the year 1984 SNEHA started associating with the Sangams formally organised by the State. By the effort of SNEHA there were separate sangams in all the villages by 1987-88. The federation was also formed in the year 1989. The federation was formed to get benefits collectively from the schemes of the government and to protest collectively against violations. The federation was facilitated by SNEHA. SNEHA trained women to federate themselves to fight for Women's rights, Children's rights and Human Rights. The Sangams were previously trained to function only on monetary basis started to

*Federation has emerged as a forum to fight for the rights of the women, to secure basic amenities and enforce gender justice*

concentrate on violation of rights also after SNEHA's intervention. In the beginning there were 9 Sangams in 9 villages and from each Sangam five members were selected. Hence the general body comprised of 45 members and the executive committee had 9 members (one from each village). Later in the year 1992 the Self Help Groups (SHGs) with 20 members in each group were formed in the 9 villages. At present there are 111 SHGs/Sangams in the Karaikal federation and there are 2000 federation members. The profit from the producer company goes to all 111 Sangams.

**Structure of the Federation**

Each federation comprises of a member from each sangam which constitute the general body of the federation. The executive body is elected by the general body once in two years.



### Problems faced by the members

In the beginning there were oppositions from the men, when they went home late after attending the meeting. There was also problems from the Panchayat when public decisions were made. At Kilinjalmadu village, there was a problem related to credit policy. The federation leader made a decision independently to distribute the credit amount equally without consulting the Panchayat was imposed with a fine of Rs.10000. The women of the federation fought against this by filing a complaint with the police and subsequently in the court. Finally the fine imposed on the federation president Vellaiyammal was removed. Dhanavalli of Kasakudimedu was assaulted as she was falsely accused of misappropriation of funds. The federation intervened in this matter also and justice was secured.

### Achievements of the Karaikal Federation

The Karaikal Women's Federation is one of the strongest and the most active. Encouraged with the success of getting roads, streetlights and transport facilities, this federation drafted a charter of nineteen demands and sent it to the Chief Minister for suitable action. They have also marked a copy to the District Administrator and the Managing Director of the Pondicherry Tourism Development Corporation. The last mentioned has been requested to ensure transport to all villages. The demands also include provision of powerful focus lights along the coast so that the fishermen could identify the coast.

Other sectoral issues which find a place in the charter of demands includes prevention of encroachments up to a distance of 500 metres from the coastline by private enterprises, loan waiver like the agricultural sector, a ban on exploitation of land for prawn culture, demand for relief during lean season, more hostels for fisher folk similar to those for the SC and ST and a strong demand for more seat allocation in the professional colleges for children. In addition to this the Karaikal federation involved in solving familial issues by approaching family counselling centres. In the year 1990, protests were made to close down an arrack shop, which was functioning near a school and was creating problems to the school.



**K. Vedhavalli**  
**President**  
**Karaikal Federation**

*Women  
faced stiff  
opposition from  
their own men  
in the home and  
traditional panchayat  
when they took  
public decisions.*

*The practice of  
Villagemen, forcing  
daughters and sons  
by the adults  
to buy liquor  
on the way  
back from school  
have encouraged  
older boys  
to consume the same.*

### **Anti Liquor Campaign**

In Karaikalmedu, where there is no prohibition, a liquor shop was situated in the close vicinity of the local government school. It was the practice of the village men to ask their sons and daughters to buy liquor for them on their way back from school. Moreover the men also frequented the shop thus depriving the family of their hard earned wages. The alarming factor was that the older children even took a swig from the bottle on the way to their homes. The women got together and decided enough was enough and took a bold step. They undertook a signature campaign in the village and also among the school children and submitted a petition to the concerned District Revenue Official who happened to be a woman official. She immediately took steps and ordered to close down the shop and thus saving the women and the children's untold misery.

### **Public Action against Sexual Abuse on Elachi, Karaikalmedu**

Seven year old Elachi was raped by Govindharaj, a 60 year old economically powerful man of the village. The matter was brought to the notice of the panchayat and the mother of the girl lodged a complaint with the local police. The police in turn referred the matter to the panchayat to settle the dispute as the accused was a fairly rich man of the village.

After much dilly-dallying over the issue, the panchayat convened a meeting in which nothing of significance was decided. The village was divided on the issue of punishment to be meted out to the accused. One group wanted a fine to be imposed while the other group wanted him to be humiliated in the public by the panchayat (a custom prevalent in this part of the country in which the accused's head is shaven off and then asking him to walk around the village with cow dung on head). The panchayat leaders were hesitant over this sort of punishment. The women's sangam approached the men's sangam for support. Consequently a meeting of the eight village panchayats was called for and the matter discussed. Finally it was agreed to impose a fine of Rs. 30,000 on the accused but the girl's mother refused to have none of it and walked away from the panchayat



meeting, which was convened as a final one. The purpose behind the whole exercise of the women was to punish the accused and not levy a fine, which he would have gladly agreed to, and be a trend setter for other men to perpetuate similar offences in the village.

He did a similar offence some two months later when he was pulled up for harassing a woman. This time the women's sangam went hammer and tongs against any move by the panchayat to protect him and they were very successful. The women quickly drummed up public opinion and this time the panchayat had no option but to execute the mandatory punishment by humiliation. The man has since left the village for good.

### **The Sri Lankan Navy Issues**

A person from the Karaikalmedu region died in the firing by Sri Lankan Navy. The people of the federation protested against this. They wanted everyone to know the dangers faced by the fishermen. The Panchayat and the collector pacified the people and requested them to do the needful.

In Kasakudimedu, three fishermen were shot dead by the Srilankan Navy and two were seriously injured and their boat capsized in the waters. The villagers of the Kasakudimedu village demanded compensation for the dead fishermen. Their demand was that the Indian Government should condemn, protest and secure adequate compensation for the lives lost. Over 2000 people congregated in front of the Karaikal Administrative Office and protested.

### **Hike in Diesel Prices**

A Rail blockade was organised by the federation members at Nagapattinam, Railway station, protesting against the hike in the diesel prices. The members of the Karaikal federation played a vital role in this Rail blockade.

### **Campaign Against Deep Sea Fishing Policy**

Hit by the modernization slogan, the Government encouraged deep sea fishing in mid 80s first through chartered vessels and

*The women  
adopted a  
'shame campaign'  
against the man  
indulged in  
sexual violence and  
he was excommunicated  
from the village.*



*The federation  
actively participated  
in campaigns against  
shrimp industries,  
SSCP,  
deep sea fishing,  
atrocities by the  
Sri Lankan Navy,  
Karaikal tourism and  
Film city project.*

then through direct investment, there were then around 180 deep sea fishing vessels in India out of which only 20 were operating viable. Despite this in reality a technical committee instituted by the Government of India recommended an increase of the deep sea fleet presuming that there were fish stocks for 2630 deep sea vessels. Based on this the government issued 128 licenses. This was stopped after a bandh conducted by the fisher people. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1997 National Fisheries Black Day was observed to which the federation extended its support and participation. Also on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1997 the fisher people from many villages participated in the struggle against deep sea fishing and submitted memorandums to the District Administrator at Karaikal.

### **Participation in Protest against Sethusamudram Shipping Channel Project (SSCP)**

The execution of this project will not only destroy the coastal habitats and bio- diversity of Gulf of Mannar, it will deprive the livelihood rights of fishing community.

Protests were made against the SSCP at Madurai, Chennai, Rameswaram and Nagapattinam. Many of the members of the Karaikal federation were arrested in the protest. The members of the Karaikal federation played a key role in these protests.

### **Campaign against Karaikal Tourism and Film City Project**

The Pondicherry Government had proposed to set up a tourism industry in Karaikal and to help attract the tourists, even planned to develop the beaches and make them resorts. There was also a plan to develop Karaikal as a film city. The suggested tourism harbour is traditionally noted for landing the motorboats of the fishermen. Since the move of the Government would naturally work against the interest of the fishermen community, a sustained campaign was taken up in 10 villages for more than a year. Representatives of the ten villages convened and a committee was formed to take up the issue with the Government. Along with the seven member group, the women's sangam members took up the issue again. Thus the long pending issue of the Pondicherry Governments move to set up a tourism industry at Karaikal was given up.



### Protest against Shrimp Industries by the Federation Wome

In the year 1994 soon after the strengthening of the federation the agitations against the prawn farms were held. A three day hunger strike was held at Nagapattinam bus stand. The leaders were arrested. Following this 2000 people from 63 villages from Karaikal and Nagapattinam came to Nagapattinam and participated in the agitation. Men and women from 63 villages participated. The participants from the federation included leading women like Vedhavalli, Vellaiyammal, Saraswathi and Nagavalli.

*The federation took up campaigns against these industries and started protests with the following demands.*

1. The Government should take adequate measures to retain the land around the coastal belt for the fisher folk as they are in need of it for future inhabitation. No private owners should be allowed to acquire these land holdings of the fisher folk.
2. The Government should take serious steps to augment drinking water as the drinking water sources are becoming salty due to the construction of prawn farms around the fishing villages.
3. The very right to survival of the fishermen is under threat as the untreated effluents are let into the sea, which will not only pollute water but also destroy the sea resources.
4. The artificial bunds constructed along the coastlines by the prawn industries has prevented the flow of natural canals, there is a danger of flooding of the fisher villages during cyclones.
5. Even fresh water resources are affected to a greater extent as many of the prawn farms dump their effluents into the river without treating it.
6. Government should allocate community based lands up to a distance of 1Kilometre.

A resolution was passed to meet the chief minister at Pondicherry and demand a total ban on all prawn farms at Karaikal in the meeting at Karaikalmedu. The chief minister and the home minister were met and handed over the resolution. The people of



*The hunger strike and Picketing led by the federation pushed the district administration to ban DCM Sriram aqua foods limited.*

the Mandapathur village blocked the work of DCM Sriram Aqua foods Ltd. A resolution was made to stop the work at L.Gnanaraj Aqua farms at Vanjore in the federation meeting at Kilinjalmedu.

A hunger strike was conducted at Karaikal in which about 2000 fisher people participated. The demand was to ban all the prawn farms. Following a discussion with the Karaikal Administration, the DCM Sriram Aqua Foods was ordered to stop the work. The Prawn industry DCM Sriram Aqua Foods got a stay against the Government order. Following this, a picketing took place at the site of DCM Sriram Aqua Foods in which 1500 fisher people participated.

A civil case was filed against 200 women in the district court of Karaikal. The accused women attended the hearing in the court without fail. The DCM Sriram Aqua Foods issued another notice to the federation threatening to file a defamation suit if they fail to withdraw their charges. The representatives from the federation met the Inspector of Police, DCR and the Executive Engineer of the PWD and represented the highhanded activity of bulldozing the casuarinas plantations of the fisher people of T.R.Pattinam.

An order on the petition was passed by the district court stating that the prawn industries should in no way affect the traditional fishing activity of the fisher people. A mass rally was organised at Karaikal demanding a total ban of all prawn farms in which 3000 people participated. A Dharna was organised at the site of DCM Sriram Aqua Foods demanding to meet the team of experts from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi to assess the request for clearance to the Acquaculture Project. The representatives met the team and discussed the issues. Finally the DCM Sriram Aqua Foods Ltd was not given licence.

#### **The Post Tsunami activities of the Karaikal federation**

The relief distribution through its federations had underscored women's capacities in the context of disaster, breaking the popular images of their helplessness and vulnerabilities. Channelling relief through the federation attracted resistance from traditional Panchayats. But this also became a strategic choice to put alternative structure in place for the future calamities and institutionalising women's groups in Disaster preparedness.

*Channeling relief through federation was a strategic choice to institutionalise the women' groups in disaster management and preparedness and make emergency response equitable and gender sensitive.*

Sangam had done a quick survey to make a gender disaggregated data based on which it could verify the list prepared by traditional panchayat. They quickly were able to spot out the excluded women and men. The gender disaggregated survey enabled them to procure appropriate clothing and other sanitary items for various age groups including adolescent girls in each household in the community. The whole relief process went through several stages, but in a finely quick and coordinated manner. Distribution was according to the family size, thus showing an example that it is possible to make emergency response equitable and gender sensitive.



### Guidelines adopted by the Federation in Distribution

- Needs analysis.
- Village wise list of beneficiaries.
- Obtaining quotations for the purchase.
- Selection of quotations with lesser price and best quality.
- Purchase in bulk at whole sale rate.
- Packing by federation members on paid basis.
- Hiring vehicles for distribution
- Tokens issued to rights holders
- Distribution of the relief items with the support of panchayat leaders
- Reviewing for gaps in the distribution

The efficient logistics, handled by women themselves also went beyond the extension of women's domestic role to the community services such as cleaning the surroundings or distributing relief to women alone. Since the federation members themselves were from the affected villages, it was easier for them to identify the affected people and distribute the relief materials.

During the process of planning the traditional panchayat claimed the right to distribution which was resisted by the federation. After much deliberations the traditional panchayat agreed to delegate their role to the federation.

Then the federation made a request for houses. Since temporary shelters were being constructed by other NGOs, SNEHA was

*The efficient logistics handled by federation members was a change in the existing gender norm from domestic role to the community services.*



requested to assist in repairing of the damaged houses. A monitoring committee was formed. The Panchayat members, women of the federation, the monitoring committee and the coordinator of the respective area assessed the damaged houses and estimated the extent of damage to the houses. The monitoring committee and the federation members ensured that the money given for house repairing is used only for that purpose.

The federation members immediately reported about the defaulters to the organisation. The federation members opted the carrier auto and vessels for rent as livelihood support activities to be promoted under producer company. At present the support activities are being managed by the federation members. The problems which emerge during implementation are being addressed by the Village Coordination Sangam (VCS).

### **The major focus of the federation in the context of tsunami :**

- ◆ Strengthening the membership of new sangams
- ◆ Identification of livelihood support activities to strengthen the income of federation
- ◆ Evolving to a common consensus on utilizing the seed money
- ◆ Identifying the gaps in the relief measures and address the same

A common consensus on the following possible fishing related livelihood options to the member villages of the federation was evolved.

1. Running carrier Auto
2. Running Share Auto
3. Availing vessels and electrical appliances for renting.
4. Running a Flour Mill
5. Using Ice Boxes for storage
6. Availing Fish Boxes, Vending Baskets and Lunch Boxes
7. Facilitating access to credit
8. Providing seed money to Women's Sangams
9. Dry Fish platform to the villages
10. Women's Activity Centres



*What the Federation has meant to us ?  
In the Voices of its creators cum members  
(Case Studies)*

- *Livelihood support*
- *Dignity*
- *Self esteem*
- *Fallback structure*
- *Mobility*
- *Claiming our rights*
- *Resisting violence*

## Case Studies

### Jayanthi

Age: 42 yrs

Village: Karaikalmedu

*Jayanthi's story is common yet unique for a rural fishing village. Common in the way that it is the story of a young widow who struggles to bring up her children all alone though ditched by family, unique because unlike other women of a fishing village, she took up tailoring to maintain her family. More unique is her grit and determination which made her involve herself fully in the Women's Federation and eventually to become the award winning president of Fisher women's co-operative in Karaikalmedu.*

*"I  
lost my  
husband  
when my son was  
three years old".*

#### Jayanthi's Story

I was born in Thazhampettai (a small fishing village in Tharangampadi taluk, Nagapattinam District) in a big fishing family. But I was not brought up here for long. I grew up in Parangipettai in Cuddalore District, which is a big village near the town. So my habits and ways are different from that of the women in rural fisher villages. I studied up to tenth standard.

I married my husband when I was 20 years old. My husband had 5 brothers. The family had a boat. My husband took care of me very well. We had two sons. When my younger son was three year old catastrophe struck us. First our boat sank. Because of that my husband started to work in his brother's boats. Family's financial situation worsened. So he went to Chennai to work as a driver in mechanised fishing boats. When he went on one such trip he never returned. After waiting for a few days and searching for a few more days we lodged a complaint. The police traced the boat finally.



On that fateful day my husband went to sea with five other fishermen from Tuticorin. While in the sea the other crewmembers decided to rob the boat and they asked him to steer the boat to Tuticorin. My husband had refused. They murdered him and threw him into the sea. We came to know of all these facts from their confession.

My life also sank. I did not even get my husband's remains. I couldn't even see his face for a last farewell. When I thought of going back to my parent's house my in-laws said that if I go I should leave my children here in my marital home and go. My children were my only hold to life. So I decided to be here only. At that time I was 24years old.

For some initial years, my in-laws took care of my children's educational expenses. When my elder son had to shift from the primary to middle school (class 6) my in-laws told us that they cannot give any money to us. We had nothing. The government had not given any compensation for my husband's death. Since dead body was not found, we cannot claim compensation.

I was literally penniless but the tailoring I had learned despite opposition from my family only saved us. If tailoring was my livelihood the sangam was my pillar of support. For any contingency and emergency I could take loan from my group.

There have been times of utter poverty. I transferred my children to the free school. So many nights we have survived on rava gruel. While I brought up my children they had to sacrifice so many of their dreams. Both my sons are good in academics but they could not go to college, as we had no money. But somehow I gave them technical education and now they are both employed. Last month my younger son went to the Middle East to work in a company. Now my family has got a breather.

Life as a single woman is really tough. When I went for the tailoring class my family members strongly protested. They said how could a married woman go out everyday? My brother - in - laws used to create a ruckus saying that their friends were asking them "where's your sister-in-law going everyday?"



*“Life  
as a single woman is  
really tough.  
If tailoring was  
my livelihood,  
the sangam was  
my pillar of support”.*



Many times my morality was questioned. But the same tailoring helped us to live with dignity.

I have been very active with the sangam right from the beginning. It was my only space where I can go away from all the pressures of home. Also when I go and see other's problems and deal with issues, it made me realize that there are greater issues than mine and it made me come to terms with my own condition. Sangam has always been my source of energy. It has strengthened me ideologically and politically. It also supported me with credit facilities whenever I needed at nominal rate of interest.

We have waged many a struggle against shrimp industries. We held an indefinite hunger fast and got that removed. Today there is a medical college in that place. When I go through that road I look at it proudly as our struggle only cleared shrimp farms from that place and got our village a medical college.

Today also I spend a lot of time with the sangam, federation and co-operative activities. Somehow it's become a very gratifying inseparable part of my life. I feel great when people see me on road and come with problems. It's almost like I've got a new lease of life when I think of it sometimes.

*"Sangam  
has always been  
my source  
of energy.  
It has strengthened  
Me ideologically  
and politically".*



## Murugammal

Age: 55 yrs

Village: Karaikalmedu

*What you remember of this grey haired talkative lady is her open and beautiful smile and not the hunch back which has determined the course of her life and strikes you immediately when you see her. A widow for the past twenty years Murugammal has educated two of her daughters up to post graduation, suffered through a brain tumor and is still going strong and with an attitude which is marvelous and an enthusiasm infectious.*



### Murugammal's story

I was one of the five sisters in my family. I was born in Karaikalmedu only and have lived here till now. I had this hunch back from childhood. I have never been into a school. I don't belong to the period when women go to school. It's a recent phenomenon. I am receiving an assistance of Rs.1000 and 10 Kgs of rice from the government as I am physically challenged.

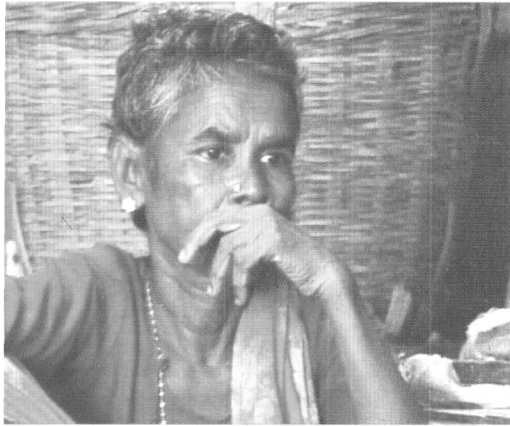
I was 24 when I got married. I was actually the second wife. Because I had this hunch back in my body no one came forward to marry me. My husband was my own maternal uncle. He was married to my younger sister. We had an affair and he married me also.

She has two sons and one daughter and I have three daughters. But I did not take any material help from them. I just stayed away. They also live in the same village. I told my husband to give all his earnings to that family only. From the beginning to end I only have worked to earn my food.

My husband passed away twenty years back. Even when my husband was there I never took a penny from him. Not even for my children. The last daughter is 22 year old. She was two when her father died.

I educated my two daughters. Actually I put all three in school. The

*“Since  
the beginning of  
my marital life,  
I have the only option  
to work and earn  
my food and  
support my children”.*



*“My membership  
in SHGs  
have prevented  
many vendors  
like me from  
taking loans  
from money lenders  
at exorbitant interest  
rate”.*

eldest could not study and she dropped out in Std. 3 itself. Second daughter studied up to M.Com. Then I got her married. Youngest daughter is studying M.Com now.

I have been selling fish in Nehru market for more than 35 years now. Most things in my life have happened when I'm here at this market only. Everyday I get up at 7 AM and go to the seashore to buy fish. I take fish from auction and get somebody to transport it to the vehicle as I cannot carry. By 9.30 – 10.00 a.m I come to this market. If I finish selling, then I go home at 2 pm. If business is not good and fish remains then I'll stay back till 9 pm. Generally I stay back till night so that I can sell it off.

It's a tough job, for a physically challenged person like me, to run to the shore and to lift baskets. All these are tough. But you have a stomach, which needs food three times a day. Not just one, I have to feed four stomachs. I don't get to eat three times a day. Morning I drink a Coffee and run to the shore. Then I go and eat food at night. In between its only coffee and betel leaves that keeps me going.

Sometimes you can't sell for the price you bought. Some days you get money from two hundred rupees to three thousand rupees.

Some days you get nothing. Some days you incur loss also. So when you get a profit you should not spend it fully. I'm in Sneha sangam. For my business I have taken loans from the group. Earlier we were taking money from money lenders at exorbitant interest rates. Now after the formation of self help groups, the money lenders themselves have been forced to reduce interest rate. Sometime I take loan from them also.

I had a tumor in my brain. I took medication for seven years. Actually I'm still taking medicines. They said that I'll last only two years. The doctor asked me not to go in the sun, not to talk much and carry anything on my head. I do all these but still I have survived. I think God knows that I have responsibilities to finish. I cannot be myself without talking. That's a huge part of our capital. 'Our talk'.

In tsunami we lost all that we had. The house was full of slush. For

the next six months also we had no access to livelihood. To start our business back we got money from the sangam. I buy fish for around one thousand five hundred to two thousand rupees a day. For transportation, carriers, plastic covers etc., we spend hundred rupees. We pay tax twice at the seashore auction place and also here for the market. Only if we make more than one hundred twenty rupees there will be any profit. On days of loss its very difficult. I have incurred loss of even a thousand rupees in a day. When fish stays back we have to make it into dry fish but all fish are not suitable for dry fish. People bargain like anything. We have to somehow manage to satisfy the customers with our price and still make an earning. It's a challenging job.

I work a lot because I need to educate my daughters. Many people ask me why I'm educating them that too girl children. I don't have a house or boat or other properties that I can leave for them. So I decided to leave education for my children which will be the only concrete asset I can give.



*“I  
have decided  
to leave education  
for my children  
which will be  
the only concrete  
asset I can give”.*



## Valarmathi

Age: 40 yrs

Village: Kilinjalmedu

*As she enters MMG nagar, with a basket full of fish on her head in her daily job of selling fish on the streets Valarmathi's presence is undeniably huge. Almost all the households treat her as one among them. Valarmathi's is a typical fishing family. Her husband and son go to sea. She got her two daughters married and they all earn to somehow pay back the loan they incurred during the marriage of the daughters and to get back to their pre tsunami condition.*

### Valarmathi's Story

On the day of the tsunami, I was in the seashore for buying fish. When we saw water coming, we just thought that it was a high tide. Generally during full moon, water comes into our street. But this wave was huge and soon it engulfed us. I was going with the water flow. There was no control over our body. Finally, I saw a tree and hold on to it. When water subsided, I realized it's not a tree but a pillar in the Renugambal temple. I could see corpses around me. I had no clothes on me. Everything was torn and washed away. In the debris, I saw two women trying to get out. I called out to others and we rescued the women. It's a nightmare I really want to forget. More than lives it killed our courage. We the fisher people are a courageous lot. Our men fare into the sea and face storms and we women go even to distant markets during the night to sell our fish. But today we are scared – scared for our lives, our children. Its very painful. But thanks to our innate strength and grit we have started our journey towards normalcy.

After tsunami my entire house had been washed out. It was the people to whom I use to sell fish that came to my immediate rescue. All my customers from MMG Nagar came in search of me. Gave me clothes, money and moral support. I was very moved by the affection they showed on me at the time of my worst crisis. Also the Federation took initiatives to raise funds for distributing relief packages to the victims.

*“Tsunami  
has scared us  
but with  
our innate strength and  
support of sangam,  
we have started our  
journey again”.*

To restart my business I needed money. With the money I got from sangam I started my work again as soon as fishing resumed. I buy fish for 500 to 1000 rupees and sell it in the streets. I carry the basket on my head and walk almost five to six Kilometers to sell the fish.

The biggest problem in this vending business is access to credit. If you have money to rotate you can earn a decent life. This is possible with the self help group that has come into our lives. Initially when we started the group in 1997, many women were doubtful of the use of the group. But now almost everyone is a member of an SHG.

Not only for fish selling, I have taken loans from the SHG for the wedding of my daughters. After Tsunami I got my second daughter married. I took a loan of 40 thousand rupees from my group.

Socially also my group (sangam) has empowered us. I have gone to Madurai, Rameswaram, Chennai and many other places for public actions and meetings. It makes me aware of so many things and I feel good to know all these things.

I have three children, two daughters and one son. I have married off both my daughters. We are heavily indebted by these marriages. All three of us my husband, son and me are working hard to pay back this debt. My husband and son go for fishing in our fibre boat. But nowadays taking a fibre boat has become so expensive. If they go for a two night trip then the cost of the trip alone is five thousand rupees. You have to get fish worth at least eight thousand rupees to make it profitable. Last week my husband came back with nothing. We lost 5000 rupees in a single day.

If we go near India- Srilanka border we'll get good fish. But its become extremely unsafe. Last month the Srilankan Navy killed two fishermen from Nagapattinam. That day my husband was also in the sea. When I heard the news in the radio I was shocked. They said two fishermen were attacked. I just sat here the whole day; did not even go for my business. Both the men of my house were out and if something happens to them, it will be a disaster for me. Only after their return, I ate. From then, they just go to nearby areas. Its safe but you don't get good fish there.



*Denial of access  
to credit for  
fish vendors is  
the biggest challenge.  
But we could  
access the same  
through our SHGs.*



## Pirami

Age: 45 yrs

Village: Karaikalmedu

*The taste of the ral vadai (prawn cookie) that she makes lingers in your tongue long after you meet this disabled spinster who ekes out her life from selling vadais. Down with a polio attack on her left leg when she was a small child Pirami today supports her whole family along with her another spinster sister. The money from the Selfhelp group has sustained her small and successful vadai business in times of distress.*

### Pirami's story

Pirami is a woman of few words. She is the primary breadwinner of her family despite being a physically challenged person. One of her leg is affected with polio and she limps. The disease afflicted her when she was a small girl. Pirami gets an assistance of Rs.1000 and 10Kgs of rice from the Government as she is physically challenged. Now almost 45 years old Pirami has remained single. "Who will marry a girl without a leg? Also who will feed us if she goes away in marriage" says her mother with a permanently depressed face. "My daughter stayed back to feed us". She adds.

Pirami's father died few months back but had been sick and bed ridden for many years. In the past fifteen years it is Pirami's income supported by her younger sister which has helped to run the home. Pirami has a brother. He can go to the sea. But he is an alcoholic. He drinks whatever money he earns. Now she only supports him, his wife and his children". says her mother.

Disability has not deterred Pirami. She makes a special kind of a snack called "ral vadai" an interesting innovation of the normal vadai. Vadai is a deep fried snack made out of ground pulses. Pirami's mother, the actual inventor of ral vadai has however modified it into a different snack with coarsely pounded rice mixed with Maida flour and fixing two prawns on it to garnish. Pirami

*Disability  
has not deterred  
Pirami.  
She is the primary  
breadwinner of  
her family.*



made it easier to make by using the automatic flour mill instead of the hand pounding method her mother used.

The delicious ral vadai costs just a rupee for a piece and the family sells all the three hundred odd vadais they make in a morning. The work for the vadai making starts much before. The previous day evening itself, they grind the flour in Karaikal. The travel and grinding costs twenty seven rupees. Then they make a paste out of maida and mix the rice flour into it in the night and leave it to ferment.

From morning six 'o' clock the vadai making starts. Most kids of the locality queue up in Pirami's house to buy the prawn snack even as she is making hot vadais. Whatever remains from the house sale will then be taken by Pirami's mother to the seashore for sales. If they sell all the vadais they'll make eighty to hundred rupees in a day.

I joined the group because I thought that in my life it can be a fall back in times of distress. It has really worked for me. Even now after tsunami we got many relief and financial help from the sangam. I take loan from the group for urgent expenses. This helps me to avoid loans from money lenders for high rate of interest.



“SHG

*is the fall back  
structure for me  
in times of distress  
as I could  
mobilize relief after  
tsunami and financial  
support for emergency  
expenses”.*



## Ponnammal

Age: 55 yrs

Village: T.R.Pattinam

"I came into this village when I was 20 and my husband Manickasamy had a catamaran. I have three sons and one daughter. All of them are married and live separately. I live alone at this old age of 55 and still eat and clothe with my labour" says Ponnammal.

Living in T.R.Pattinam as a fish seller for five years Ponnammal joined the SHG and the Karaikal Federation six years back to "save some money and learn about new things and go to new places"

The moment she recalls Tsunami which altered her life permanently she shudders. "My husband had gone to sea that day. I heard people shouting and crying and ran out to see what was happening. Hell broke loose all over. I couldn't even go and search for my husband. Had to protect my daughter and grand children. We ran evading the waves and reached a kalyana mandapam ( marriage hall) where people were kept." Sobbing softly Ponnammal says in almost inaudible faint voice, "We found his body two days later. Life has changed so much. I feel very alone and weak. They did not even pay the full compensation to us".

"My last son is in Malaysia. He earns well. But he sends the money to his elder brother. I don't know why my sons don't take care of me. Daughter is supportive but not the sons. All my life I lived for their welfare. But I don't want to go and plead them either. I can live with dignity on my own. Though I am old, I will not beg or borrow".

Ponnammal buys fish and sells in the T.R.Pattinam market. "Sometimes you get a profit of hundred rupees. But sometimes you get a loss of hundred rupees also. Fish selling is like life itself - unpredictable".

"I have attended many meetings of Sneha. The Sneha workers come here and tell us important happenings that affect our life and in general also. I am thankful to them for the same".

*"I  
don't want  
to go to my sons.  
I can live  
with dignity on my own.  
Though I am old,  
I can work  
I will  
not beg or borrow".*



## Rasammal

**Age:** 58 yrs

**Village:** Kilinjalmedu

The sangam is almost an inseparable part of my life. It has given me a kind of freedom and strength to deal with life. As a single woman fish vendor, its also the most reliable kitty bank that I depend solidly on.

Rasammal is a strong old woman. Her strength comes out in the manner in which she talks and the way she carries herself. Rasammal married Chinnathambi of Kilinjalmedu and had five children.

Her only daughter Kupamma died after she gave birth to a blue baby (child with a congenital valve failure in the heart). Rasammal raised all her four sons and they all live with their wives today.

Rasammal's husband died twelve years back. "He committed suicide. I had gone to a nearby village to get dry fish for selling and at that time he burnt himself to death. I still don't know why he did that. People blame me but I know that my conscience is clear. I loved my husband and family truly. I grieve for his death but don't understand his decision".

"I'm bringing up my grandson who has this heart condition. As my sons got married I made them into independent families. Hence we have a healthy and happy family now though we do not stay under the same roof. If we all are together one of my daughters-in-law can question me about the grand son".

I have been in the sangam for seven years now. It has been my best friend. This dry fish business has ups and downs. Unlike fish the rotation of money is slow here. Whenever I get stuck the sangam has helped me with a loan. First I took a loan for ten thousand. I paid back correctly. Then I took another loan of five thousand which I paid back again in time. Now I have taken a loan of five thousand again. I repay promptly and they always help me." In my personal life also I have this independence. I live alone. I like it. I want to take care of my grandson which I'm doing. I work and earn and live. Its simple and satisfying. The sangam is the support system I rely on. Without it I might have to depend on others from which I'm freed now.



*"The sangam  
has been  
my best friend  
for the past 7 years.  
It is  
the support system.  
I rely on  
whether to  
avail loan  
or to get advise".*



## Muthummal

Age: 65 yrs

Village: Kilinjalmedu

*Sitting behind a concrete bench lined up with an assorted variety of dry fish in all shapes and sizes, a soft spoken Muthammal is a resilient woman who runs the business her mother used to do. Keeping a tradition alive in changing times, Muthammal heads the family as her husband remains at home not doing any work.*

A separate line has been given to the dry fish sellers in the Karaikal Nehru Market. While there are numerous fish sellers in the market, dry fish sellers are a few. Many women from the village of Kilinjalmedu are involved in dry fish selling. Muthammal is one of the medium vendor. Her shop holds stock upto rupees thirty thousands. While the big vendors hold upto 1 lakh worth stock, the small vendors buy from these big and medium vendors on a daily or weekly basis and sell them.

Most fish sellers are relatives of the dry fish vendors. They have to make dry fish out of unsold fish they have and sell it to the dry fish vendors.

Muthammal's mother Lakshmi was actually running this shop in the Nehru market and when she died the reins were passed on to the daughter.

"I have been running this for twenty years now. After me, my daughter-in-law will take over" says Muthammal.

"It's a tough job. You have to buy the fish from the sea shore and then clean the innards. Put salt and dry it. Then you have to clean it again and salt it and dry for three days to a week depending on the kind of fish and the weather".

The drying process though sounds simple on paper is much more complicated as the women have to save the fish from the cats and birds and more importantly from the frequent drizzles.

"In earlier days we used to buy on credit the fish and we'll pay

*"Processing  
is a tough job.  
you have to  
buy the fish,  
clean the innards,  
put salt and dry it,  
clean it again  
and dry for  
three days to seven  
days  
and protect it  
from frequent drizzles  
and  
birds and cats"*

back later. It was a kind of barter system. Now there are unions and we have to pay cash and take the fish. Also there is not much fish nowadays. So we go to the dry fish makers in Nagapattinam, Akkaraipettai and buy dry fish itself. There you can take for credit also”.

Muthammal's family is typically large, she has two daughters and five sons. She has given both the daughters in marriage, “Of course we have to give dowry. In our caste we don't give cash. Its gold jewellery and all the stuff you need for the house”. Four of her sons are married. Two of them live separately. She lives with her three sons, two daughter in laws and grand children.

“He hasn't gone to the sea for more than fifteen years now”. She says about her husband. Then how does the family boat sail?

“All of us work. My sons are doing commission agency for some fish exporting houses. Not big money. Together we earn the daily food. If we earn a little bit more we pay the debts with that”.

Tsunami wreaked havoc on Muthammal's family. “I lost twenty thousand worth stock I had. No compensation for that. We had no boat or net or anything. So the only compensation we got is the money, Sneha gave us to repair the house”.

While many labourers in the village who did not have boats prior to tsunami have been given boats collectively by NGOs, Muthammal's family did not get one. “We did not want it. We are a family ruined by the boat. The boat makes some people prosperous but not us. Earlier we had a boat. It met with accidents constantly and repairing it made us paupers literally. One day my sons broke the boat and got firewood out of it. That's all. So we did not want a boat”.

Muthammal has been in the self help group right from its inception. She has taken loans from the SHG for her business and towards marriage expenses of her daughters. But she has also taken loan from money lenders for 10% interest. She says the dry fish business needs atleast twenty thousand rupees investment. “If government gives us a low interest loan we will be relieved of these money lenders”.



*“The only  
compensation for the  
loss of stock in  
Tsunami,  
I got is from SNEHA.  
They extended support  
to repair the house”.*



## Valli

Age: 40 yrs

Village: Karaikalmedu

*Widowed recently, Valli literally works as much as possible. Selling fish on the streets in the day in a nearby village in the evening she struggles to make ends meet of her large family of four daughters and two sons.*

While Valli's family survived the tsunami, it met with a complicated situation, which left her a widow. Valli's husband did not have any boat before the tsunami and he got a boat with four others from an NGO. After a year of receiving it, Valli's husband and his group decided to sell it off. Valli didn't know about this. Valli who had been at her relative's house for ten days returned one day four months ago to find that her husband had not only sold the boat, but has also spent the money on alcohol. The two lakh worth boat was sold for fifty thousand rupees and Valli's husband made merry with the ten thousand rupees he got as his share. Shocked by the incident Valli fought with her husband. Her husband beat her up badly as a result of which she fainted.

"He seems to have tried to wake me up. Since I couldn't, he thought I was dead and hanged himself and died" says a sad Valli. The net result is that Valli has neither the boat nor the money and not even her husband. She has four daughters whom she has to give in marriage with dowry and other things. Her sons are the youngest of all the children and are attending the local school. Two of her daughters are also in school.

A typical day starts early for Valli and she is one of the early birds in the sea shore. She buys a comparatively larger quantity of fish. Then goes home and sets off on her journey to sell the fish in the Thirunallar main road and the colony opposite to Murugaram theatre, is a middle class colony. Many people in the colony are her regular customers. She literally runs between the houses in a constant hurry as a fish vendor. But she still finds time for people who insist on her cleaning and cutting the fish they bought from her. By one 'o clock she finishes her rounds and rushes back home, fills her tiffin carrier with some food and runs again to the Karaikalmedu main road where a fisheries department van waits to take her and another 16 women to distant villages. The van is filled with baskets full of fish and trip begins once everyone

*As  
a fish vendor,  
she literally runs  
between the houses  
in a hurry,  
but still finds  
time for cleaning  
and cutting the fish  
for her customers.*

assembles. "This is the small breathing time I have." says Valli as she is eating her lunch from her tiffin box. The time is almost 3.00p.m

She gets down at Vizhithiyur village and sets up her shop in the junction of the main road. Now starts the next four hours of getting people buy it, display the fish, get over the bargain, clean the fish, collecting money routine and now she has a target to meet. "In my morning trip even if some fish remains I'm not worried. I can add it to my sale in the evening but now I have to finish all this fish, then only I can make a profit.

Valli has been selling fish for twenty years now. She is an active member of the women's sangam. She has availed loans from the sangam more than three times. She is regular in repaying her loans so that she could always use this facility. She says "I wish to be more active but hand to mouth existence keeps me on tender hooks and the run is always on. Even if I'm sick I think thrice before taking an off".

The federation with the support of Swiss Red Cross and Swiss Solidarity Alliance has given the Village Coordination Sangam a carrier vehicle to support the fish vendors transport their fish. She adds that "Auto carrier especially had bought a significant change in the lives of fish vending women and other community members when it has space. Not only the head loading burden has been reduced, it saves time for women who used to walk 10 Km per day or would face harassment in the bus and have frequent arguments with the Conductor. The auto carrier has restored their dignity and increased the sense of security for them. Going collectively is an enhancing experience for all the women, though they eventually get off at different places Asset ownership of federations on the one hand strengthens the institutional capacities of federation. The federation is ready now to buy another auto in view of the increased demand for it as well as the sustainability of income it ensures to the federation. The stock of vessels for their rental value to the all the taluk level fisherwomen federations which fetches good income to it. The venture is sustainable as already the inventory of vessels has seen an increase as federation has reinvested the profit in buying more vessels as per the demand of the consumers".



*"Auto Carriers  
have saved  
the women from  
time-poverty.  
Asset ownership  
of the federation  
has strengthened  
the institutional  
capacities of the  
federation".*



## Thamayanthi

Age: 45 yrs

Village: Akkampettai

*A fair, faint looking soft spoken person Thamayanthi lives with her sons in Akkampaettai. A HIV positive person, who lost her husband to AIDS, lives with a young son who is also HIV positive.*

Thamayanthi was born in T.R.Pattinam to Nataraj and Annakannu along with four siblings. She married Manickam of Akkampettai when she was 20 years old. Manickam owned a fibre boat. In order to expand his business he sold his fibre boat and invested money he took as loan and bought a mechanised boat. "We had hoped that life will turn upwards after that. But as fate would have it the boat went broke due to floods and general wear and tear. Then we lost it and had just a catamaran."

As business was going the hard way, life dealt another blow to the couple. "I was operated for a tumour in the Nagapattinam government hospital in 1995. There I was given infected blood. I was inflicted with HIV. Then I didn't know. But my younger son has also got it and my husband also got it." Tears roll down from Thamayanthi's eyes.

Thamayanthi's family realized the disease only when Manickam started falling sick and did a medical check up. "I felt like killing myself. I just could not handle the fact that my young innocent son who does not even know what life is today facing death. How does a mother deal with such agony you tell me?"

"I'm living out of dole my children get from an NGO. I'm trying to run this petty shop and eke out a livelihood. The village treats me fine. But health is faltering. I feel giddy if I exert myself".

"I joined the SHG in 2000. My husband was also a big supporter of the fish worker's movement when Sneha initiated struggles to protect the coast. He used to attend all meetings. It's through him that I got interested. When my husband died, the federation got me the gratuity amount. I have been part of the SHG and it has helped me in so many ways. Recently also I took a loan for my daughter's wedding. Going to the meetings builds my strength to face the day-to-day challenges"

"SHG  
has helped me  
in many ways.  
It builds  
my strength to face the  
day to day challenges".

## Muthulakshmi

**Age:** 50 yrs

**Village:** Karaikalmedu

*A strong and articulate woman Muthulakshmi comes from a “kudipillai” (a lower caste within the fishing community who are supposed to act as subordinates of the traditional community Panchayat of fisher people). She also is the head of her family as her husband gets income only occasionally.*

Waiting in the seashore for the fibre boat of her sons to arrive, Muthulakshmi is engaged in constant banter with everyone around. “My sons bought this boat from one of the tsunami beneficiary who sold it for eighty thousand rupees.” Her sons arrive with a sack load of fish. She takes it to the auction place and gives it to one of the auctioneers. After a hectic bidding the fish was sold for five hundred rupees. “After diesel and other dues we get two hundred out of this today. Some days nothing remains also”.

After finishing that work she goes for fish vending. “All of us have to earn to run the house and pay debts” Muthulakshmi has recently built a house which has been a long cherished dream, the dream of having your own roof above your head before death. “We have taken loan for the house. We have taken loan for the boat. We have to pay for both. That’s why we work more.”

Muthulakshmi buys the fish, washes it, packs it with ice and then carries it to a small agricultural village called Ambal, twenty Kilometers away. “I have been coming here for the past twenty years”.

Muthulakshmi also supports her sister’s family. “What to do? She is my younger sister. Right from the marriage her husband troubled her. She was living between here and there. Now after tsunami he burnt himself to death. She and her three children are with us. She doesn’t know fish business. I support them also.

I was a member in the first formed Women’s Organisation too.



**SHG**

*has given loans  
for housing and  
for buying boats.  
We feel safe  
and secured.*



*“The money  
I get from  
SHG is not only  
my capital  
with low interest  
but also  
my insurance.  
It is not just  
the money,  
the confidence  
it has given is  
incredible”.*

Then I came to know that SHGs were formed in the village with 20 members in each group. Jayanthi and few others have formed a group. So I contacted Indirani who is working as a co-ordinator with Sneha and asked her about the details of forming groups. Then we formed our own group with her support and facilitation”.

According to Muthulakshmi, for the fish vendors the group and its money have been extremely useful. “For an emergency everyone takes money from the group. But for us, the vendors, it is our capital with low interest and also our insurance. If we loose stock or incur a huge loss then we can always go and take a loan from the group”.

Its not just the money, the confidence it has given is incredible. We have gone to numerous struggles. In Nagapattinam we once staged public protest and stopped the trains. The trains were not stopping, so all of us went and rested on the railway lines. The train was approaching us. All the men in queue got up and went, but we remained unwavering. The train halted 1 metre away from us. Everybody appreciated our courage.

We are an inseparable part of village decisions now. Though the Panchayat does not entertain women, they realize our strength and refer any family problems to us instead of they themselves resolving it.



**Kavitha Subramanyam**

Age: 40yrs

Village: North Vanjur

*A confident woman greets you at her tsunami permanent shelter the front portion of which has been made into a multipurpose petty shop cum phone booth. At 33, Kavitha is a very worldly wise woman.*

"I was born in this village, North Vanjur. When I was 14 I attained puberty. I was studying in class 8 at that time. They got me married to my maternal uncle who was 25 year old. Now I have three children. My eldest son is 19 year old. When I was young I wanted to study and when I got married was heart broken. But I have nurtured my dream to go out and make a difference and the SHG movement gave me that chance on a platter"

Kavitha has initiated the process of SHG building in her village which is one of the tiny hamlets of the Karaikal coast. "They started a women's organisation in our village. It couldn't function for long. In 2004 we started an SHG. I saw that everywhere women were getting into SHGs and changing their lives. Our village being a tiny and remote coastal hamlet (72 families) things had not changed much. So we started our group called Vasantha Vanji. Sneha's backing has enabled us to come this far."

"Our main relief due to the SHG is the lower interest rate. Until we had our sangams we were taking loans from money lenders for both business/trade needs as well as personal needs. They used to charge exorbitant rates of interest from 5 to 10 percent. In our SHG its only 2 percent. Also the interest for our savings comes back to us".

"Personally the SHG helped us to build up our shop gradually. Apart from that it satisfies my need to lead a meaningful life and gives me the happiness that I'm helping others. Many of our sangam members use the credit facility to buy stock for fish selling and dry fish business. Some of them run Idli shops and other petty shops like mine".



*I  
lead a  
meaningful life.  
Thanks to  
my SHG.  
My role in SHG  
gives me happiness  
as I am able  
to help others.*



“As members we have got involved and solved many issues, extending family counselling, getting relief for left out women, etc,. Even the tsunami compensation for fish selling women was given to only 10 percent of the affected women. We fought for it and got compensation for all the affected women”.

Kavitha and her team are confident of solving any problem at the village level. “Even the traditional panchayat calls us in the case of any family dispute. All that we want now is training to work on and resolve issues at the macro level. Sneha co-ordinator has told us that we can do it”.

*We  
are confident  
of solving  
any problem  
in our village.*

## Kalvi

Age: 42 yrs

Village: T.R. Pattinam

*Marrying Samimalai when she was 19, Kalvi's life was happy till the tidal waves wreaked havoc on her. Tsunami struck Kalvi and her family as they were eating their Sunday morning breakfast on 26.12.04. Kalvi was later rescued from a heap of dead bodies near the T.R.Pattinam temple by her husband.*

My pre tsunami life is almost like a dream now. My husband never drank apart from the occasional beer party with friends. We had three children. 2 sons and one daughter. My children were my biggest assets." "All I remember is my husband calling us out and then water engulfed us. When water was receding I was holding a child and my husband was holding two of them but the force was so immense that we could not save the children. That moment still kills me when I stood helpless unable to save my children who were my life"

"I was naked and bruised all over the body. I was so sick that I couldn't even go for my sons burial. I went and searched for my daughter's body and buried it." Kalvi had undergone tubectomy after her third daughter's birth and the death of all her three children was a huge blow to her and her family. As per her family's wish and with her own desire to have children Kalvi underwent the recanalisation operation along with six other women of her village.

Two years after tsunami now Kalvi's life has turned upside down and her husband became a drunkard. "Starts the day itself with alcohol now". Samimalai wants Kalvi to get him a second wife. "He says that he needs children and since I cannot have I should get him remarried. Samimalai refuses to go to the sea saying that he has no reason to earn now. He beats up Kalvi for no reason and disappears on and off. He is gone for one week now. If I go and call him to come back he will ask me to agree for the remarriage. Every day there is a fight with my husband. Wherever



*"Everyday  
there is a fight  
with my husband  
for the loss of  
children.  
It starts  
and ends with  
remarriage".*



it starts it ends with the remarriage issue and the blame on me for not having children”.

Kalvi joined the Sneha sangam post tsunami but says that the SHG is her only solace now. “I never thought such a situation will come to me. I’m myself so sad thinking about my children. I went and told Indirani akka (sister) about this. She came and spoke to my husband saying that the sangam women will not sit and look at his second marriage as spectators and that it is illegal”.

After the women’s federation intervened Samimalai has not been vocal about his desire to remarry. But now he is trying to coax Kalvi’s relatives to advise her. Kalvi’s suggestion that they can adopt a child have been turned down by Samimalai.

The federation is backing Kalvi in this complicated fight for her space. “I’ve already lost my children. Its not my fault however. Now I don’t want to lose my husband and live as lone woman. He is not worried about the children. He only wants another wife. I won’t let him get away with this. Initially I thought I’ll kill myself. Now the sangam is behind me. I’ll fight this injustice”.

“*As  
the sangam is  
supporting me,  
I will  
fight the injustice  
inflicted  
upon me  
by my husband*”.

## Dhanavalli

Age: 45 yrs

Village: Kasakudimedu

*An outspoken lady Dhanavalli was born in Karaikalmedu and was married to Rasakkannu of Kasakudimedu when she was 23 years old. Rasakkannu was going to the sea in his boat. In 1986 the boat he went had an encounter with the Srilankan Navy whose bullets fell Rasakkannu.*

I have survived many crises that life brought my way. The men of my village always wanted to break my spirit because it unnerves them that being a woman I'm so bold and courageous. But I will not give up says 43 year old Dhanavalli.

"No dead body was retrieved. The boat was also gone. I cried to the mother sea. I banged the doors of every possible government office. Nothing happened. They said they cannot compensate".

At 26 Dhanavalli was left with her two infant sons Arul of three years and Raja of 1½ years to feed for herself and family with practically no support.

"I took to fish vending and its this sea and the trade that saved my family from poverty and hunger." Life for Dhanavalli has been one big roller coaster ride. "I built my house and brought up my two sons with such difficulties. The village even tried to call me a slut and outcaste me. I fought against that also courageously".

Dhanavalli was an active SHG person and she initiated the group not just in her village but in many nearby villages also. She was an active member and president of the group. She was also chosen to be the president of the society also. Dhanavalli received a revolving fund of fifteen thousand rupees and she deposited it in the bank.

A member of the self help group Seeniammal spread rumours that Dhanavalli had misappropriated the revolving fund provided to them. Seeniammal's son Vaithyanathan is a money lender. He



*"I  
have survived  
many crises.  
My courageous and  
bold nature  
threatens men.  
They wanted to  
break my spirit.  
I will not  
give up".*



had been affected by the sangams as they gave credit for a lower interest. Hence he had a motive against Dhanavalli. Vaithyanathan with a vengeance assaulted Dhanavalli on her way to fish vending after attending a meeting. Dhanavalli was severely injured. When this incident took place, no one came to rescue Dhanavalli except Thangaponnu, a member of the same self help group. Thangaponnu took Dhanavalli to Sugam Priya Hospital at Karaikal and admitted her. When Dhanavalli was in the hospital, Thangaponnu informed the federation about the incident. The federation members went to the hospital and took photographs of Dhanavalli's injuries as evidence for the assault on her.

A case was registered against the money lender Vaithyanathan and Seeniammal. Dhanavalli was critically injured. She had injuries on her head. She was not able to go for fish vending for years. After regaining her health, she became the head of the co-operative also. At that time the panchayat men came and fought with the administration. The co-operative senior inspector told them that women have been fighting for the co-operative and they should only get the positions in it.

"The men feel that their control will go if we all come out in open and challenge them. Personally I'm not even bothered about men. I haven't studied at all. But I feel this courage in me. Before the formation of SHGs for introducing savings and credit programme, we functioned as a rights based women's association alone (one Sangam in one village). We have taken many women related, development and environment oriented issues and fought for it. All intimidations have only strengthened my courage".

Dhanavalli's sons are not happy with their mother's involvement in the SHG movement especially after the attack on her. "They keep telling why do you go to this? I always answer them that Yes there have been problems to us because of being in the sangam but its also because of being in the sangam that I'm bold today and I am able to fight back anything against me".

*"If  
we challenge men,  
they feel that  
they loose  
their control.*

*All intimidations  
have only  
strengthened us.*

*Sangam is  
our source of strength.*

*We will fight  
back anything that is  
against us".*



## Manimekalai

Age: 37 yrs

Village: T.R.Pattinam

*A tall lanky women Manimekalai talks matter of fact on almost anything. "I'm 37 year old. I was born in this family with three brothers and one younger sister. My marriage somehow did not happen. I remained single by choice. But then do we have a choice with poverty?"*

Born in T.R.Pattinam to Velayudham and Pooranam, Manimekalai lifted the fish basket "at twenty and I'm yet to keep it down. As long as I have strength in this body I'll sell fish and survive".

"My mother used to sell fish and support our family. My father does not take responsibility. He is irregular to work and hardly brings home any money. My mother was the pivot of this family. I wanted to support her in this ordeal, so I joined her in selling fish".

"Slowly we got my sister married. I was not keen on marriage and also the situation was bad. My brothers got married and left. They did not want to bear the burden of the family. Eight years back my mother fell sick. She was bed ridden and passed away six years back. I started taking care of my mother and the need to work only increased".

"After my mother left me alone in this unkind world I didn't have much hope. But I lived on to protect my father. Sometimes I wonder what is the purpose of this life? A few proposals for marriage came my way but my father thought he wouldn't have anyone to take care of him and used to ask me, "Are you also going to leave me and go?" I decided to stay on. But now life is so empty. My father passed away a year back. Now if I fall sick also there is no one to buy me a tablet".

Manimekalai joined the sangam after the tsunami. "Until then, only married women were taken into the SHGs. After tsunami I wanted some fall back and protection. So I thought joining the SHG will be a support to me".



*"As  
a single woman,  
I feel that  
sangam is my  
fall back structure.  
It will support  
and protect me".*



Manimekalai sells fish by carrying it on her head. "I sell it in the streets of Niravi. I earn between thirty to sixty rupees a day. With this kind of an income imagine what I can save and put away for my old age. That way also I feel the SHG will help me to have a savings mechanism. I'm sure there will atleast be money for my last rites".

The gloom of her one room hut and her own grief leaves way to a brief glint of light when she talks about the federation meetings. "In this village there is no respect for an unmarried woman. But when I go to the federation meetings I keep my head high because there I get respect both from the women and the outside men".

*"As  
an unmarried  
Woman,  
I get respect  
from the sangam  
and  
outside men".*

## Deivanai

Age: 35 yrs

Village: T.R.Pattinam

*Tsunami has affected me the most. I wouldn't have blamed it even if it had killed me. It took my children and now every day is like experiencing death.*

Deivanai is 35 years old and a picture of sadness today. Born in Seruthur with three brothers and one elder sister Deivanai married her elder sister's brother-in law, Selvamani. Deivanai had three children, one daughter and two sons. Until Tsunami life was normal and good. "My children were so bright and obedient. My eldest child was my daughter Deepa. My life revolved around them and they also loved me so much. My husband was very good to us and was doing well in the sea business also".

During Tsunami Selvamani was away at Mangalore for seasonal fishing. "I was in our field at that time and the children were at home. When tsunami struck I was caught in the waves and till date I don't know how I escaped. But God did not help my children the way he helped me. All three of my children were taken away. In one stroke, the sea destroyed my family".

Deivanai's husband came back after five days as transport was all screwed up. He came and asked Deivanai for the children. "He still blames me for the death of my children. The very word kills me. I can never express how much I miss my children and the sorrow that will never leave my heart when I think of their death. But to hear from my husband that I was responsible for their death is like adding more grief into my already grieving heart".

Deivanai underwent recanalisation operation hoping for a child. "More than any body's compulsion I wanted to have children. I hate my empty house. I want to fill it with the laughter and light my children used to spread there." Contrary to her dreams, after two years of the operation Deivanai has not conceived and the family has become a battle field for the same. Selvamani does not go to the sea and is lost into drinking.



*"My husband  
blames me for  
the death of  
my children.  
Everyday is like  
experiencing death".*

“We even tried for the test tube baby. They said it would cost seventy thousand rupees and still has only fifty percent chances.” When asked whether she is aware of the fact that recanalisation even when done under the best conditions has only 40 percent success rate, Deivanai answers in the affirmative. “The doctor told us that. But we prayed to God that we be in the fifty percent”.

“My husband wants to marry again. I will never accept it as it would ruin my life totally. He says that he will still look after me properly and that he wants children. But how will the other wife accept to it and why should I live like that?”

Only after the Tsunami I joined the Sangam but because of it only I realized that I can also take decisions and have control over my life. It's true that we need children. But why cannot he accept to adoption? My sangam women will support me and I will break his design of marrying again.

*“Because  
of sangam,  
I realise that  
I can  
take decisions and  
have control over  
my life”.*

## Suguna

Age: 24 yrs

Village: Akkampettai

*Suguna can easily be taken for a school student if not for the gold wedding chain and the infant Saranya in her arms. A very young mother, Suguna at 24 has a 6 year old daughter.*

Suguna was born as one of seven children to Peramasamy and Mariammal in Akkampettai village in the Karaikal coast. "Four brothers and two sisters I have. I was very keen on studying and enjoyed going to school. But when I was in fourth my younger brother was born and I was stopped from the school and made to take care of him".

Suguna fell in love when she was 18 with a guy from her own village. "We both were in love and thought of getting married. But when he realised that I am pregnant he deserted me and married a rich girl from Tharangampadi. Hell broke loose and my entire family got very angry with me".

After a huge show down on Suguna, the family decided to save its honour by getting Suguna married to her sister's husband. "I did not want to. But I was on the wrong side and why would anybody listen to me. My sister's husband was 15 years elder to me and my sister had 4 children. They just got me married. It was just a token thing. He lives with my sister and I live with my mother. My child is the only solace I have" Suguna wipes her tears and hugs cherubic Saranya who is looking at her mother's tear as if it is a daily affair.

The relationship between the sisters also has soured after the token marriage. "Last week also for no big reason my sister and her husband (also Suguna's husband) dragged me and my mother to the street and beat us up and abused us in such denigrating words".

At twenty four, life for Suguna has come a full circle and now she faces a bleak future with a six years old Saranya and a very old mother who still sells fish in the Kottucherry market to make ends



*"When my lover  
deserted me,  
I was married  
to my sister's husband  
to save the honour  
of the family  
and  
hide my pregnancy".*



meet. "I cannot remarry. I have this child and I'm already a fallen woman in the eyes of my community, Even if somebody comes asking for me in marriage they will not take my daughter. And how can I leave her? What will be the difference between me and her father then?"

Suguna's only source of happiness according to her is her outings as part of the SHG and the occasional film shows she catches with friends. "I joined the Mettioli sangam after tsunami hoping that it will give me some protection and help. I really enjoy going to the meetings and struggles. I feel like a full human being when I'm there. Whatever I do they talk behind me. Its so painful to go through this".

"I don't know what future holds for me. I tried to learn tailoring but don't have a machine. I want to go for a job but I am very scared of what people will talk behind me. As long as my mother is alive its fine. When I think what will happen after that its really scary. There are times when I go out with friends and to the sangam meetings and the struggles I feel like I'm ok. Thats all".

*"I really  
enjoy going  
to the meetings  
of sangam.  
I feel like a  
full human being  
when I am there".*

## Boopathi

Age: 35 yrs

Village: Akkampettai

*Boopathi lives in Akkampettai village. A woman of few words, Boopathi runs a vegetable cum grocery petty shop from her tsunami permanent house in the resettled tenements. Burdened by the hard labour of buying stock and running a shop on her own and fending for her son studying in the school, Boopathi still retains the grit of the resilient fisher woman.*

"I was born in Kalikuppam along with 4 siblings to Vairakannu and Elachi. My father Vairakannu was a fisherman. He did not have a boat. He used to work as a labourer. My mother used to sell fish". Life as a fishworker's daughter, Boopathi had a hard life fighting with poverty at every level. Poverty and the fact that she was a girl rendered her illiterate. "I attended school for a few months. Dropped out when I was in second standard".

"I was married at 20 to Balakrishnan, of Akkampettai who is also a fish worker. Two years I lived with him. He was a soft spoken guy and used to drink a lot. But never beat me up or anything. At that time I was a house wife and had a son." Life could not go that peaceful for Boopathi. Unfortunately for her, the alcoholism of her husband rendered her into a phase of hard single life.

"On that day, my husband was drunk way beyond his limit. He was swaggering even as he came home and started beating me badly. I was bruised, bleeding and my son was crying. As I was trying to console the child my husband in his total drunkenness set himself on fire in our own back yard in front of my eyes and my infant child's eyes." Boopathi pauses a moment from her detached wry description of the catastrophe that hit her family. "I've learnt not to think of it too much", she adds. "All efforts to save him failed. And life became this toughest journey I was forced to take." Boopathi tried to pick strains of her life by running a petty shop. Did she consider remarriage? "No in my society I cannot even play a role in the first marriage. So the family only will decide. I had a son. I wanted to take care of him. Remarriage is a taboo on the seaside. Things are changing now but 14 years back it was unheard of".



*"Remarriage  
is a taboo on the  
seaside.*

*Things are  
changing now.*

*It was unheard  
on the seaside  
before 14 years".*





*“I  
used to be a  
timid home bird.  
sangam has given me  
a lot of confidence.  
I believe in  
gender equality”.*

“There is no one from my husband’s family alive to support me. My family also is very poor. My mother lives with me. I only support her. But she being around is a moral support and wards of many unwanted comments from the villagers”. Life as a single woman is tedious as anywhere else in the fishing hamlets. Living totally alone can raise questions of morality in the villager’s eyes.

For the first time Boopathi’s voice rings louder with suppressed anger. “They all talk a million things. A woman without a husband is considered a slut. The horrible thing is that many people want you to be a slut and if you don’t then they slander you. Even women indulge in such talk. We are constantly monitored. If someone comes to my house then the rumour mill will immediately start. I get very angry at this. Here I am trying to lead a dignified life and bring up my son with the paltry sum I get from this shop working almost 20 hours a day and people come and hit words on us”.

Boopathi joined the Sneha’s self help group after tsunami and received relief and other support from the relief and reconstruction programme. “I restarted my petty shop after tsunami with the help of the loan and seed money I got from my group. The interest is low and its not as complicated or demeaning to ask for loans from local money lenders”.

Boopathi says that she had not been directly involved in any campaign activities, but she had heard of the campaign for antiliquor activities undertaken by SNEHA and expressed that these activities were absolutely necessary.

“The one problem however is, there are too many shops here now due to the tsunami reconstruction programmes of various NGOs. So my business is dull. Somedays I make very less money not even ten rupees. I don’t know how to cross this bottleneck”.

Boopathi is hell bent on making her son study come what may, and has a larger world view today which has given her confidence. “I used to be a timid home bird. The SHG and the post tsunami meetings and programmes have given me a lot of confidence. I believe that men and women are equal and we have to be treated equally”.



## Raniyammal

Age: 55 yrs

Village: Kilinjalmedu

*Raniyammal is a staunch woman of clear and forthright words. One of the big dry fish vendors from Kilinjalmedu, Raniyammal sells her dry fish in her own village and in far away places such as Mayiladuthurai and Thiruvarur.*

I've seen the ups and downs of life both in my family life and in the dry fish business. There are very few things which sustain you in difficult times. My sangam is one such sustainer for me.

"My mother died when I was young. My father had boat and net when I was a kid. But after my mother's death he sold everything. My mother died during delivery of my brother. I stopped my education with third standard to take care of the younger siblings".

Raniyammal was married to Kesavan of Kilinjalmedu. Kesavan is slightly disabled and runs a tailor shop. She gave birth to four daughters and one son.

"When the family started growing and the income from the tailor shop did not suffice, I started the business. My family did not accept it. But I used to buy fish from the shore without the knowledge of my family and put it for drying on the shore. Later I'll sell it".

The business which started clandestinely has grown into a big one and Raniyammal is one of the big dry fish vendors in Karaikal today. Economically also she brought her family out of poverty. But life had a big tragedy in store for them.

In 96 Raniyammal put all her savings together and took some loans to buy a boat for her son. The boat was hoped to bring about change in their family's prosperity drastically. On a seasonal shift to Jagadapattinam in Pudukottai district, the boat capsized in mid sea and broke down. "We some how repaired the boat and then I took my father also to that place to help my son. My son was not



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very good in the seafare. My father died in Jagadapattinam due to old age. We incurred huge losses in the business. I went to Jagadapattinam with dreams of stabilizing the family. I came back with one and a half lakh rupees of loan”.

It has taken ten years and Raniyammal is still paying back her loans and trying to rebuild her business. “I took another ten thousand loan for capital and re-started the work. Earlier I used to be young and healthy so was able to do good business. Now-a-days it is tough.

Tsunami was the last thing we needed. Tsunami took all our stock away. Dry fish selling is a long term process. We keep buying good fish at different times and hold the stock with us. A good dry fish vendor should have different stock worth atleast thirty thousands with them. Rebuilding a proper stock will need as much money”. But the government did not compensate the fisher women for the capital loss they incurred. But after the intervention of the federation women and their meeting with the Chief Minister, the government paid a compensation of Rs.3000 for the tsunami affected women.

“If not for the sangam and federation I don’t know what would have happened to me, I can’t even imagine. Every time I needed that loan for buying stock I have taken the support of my group. I have taken loans from the money lenders also. But after the sangam was started my entire dependence on the heartless money lenders has decreased drastically. Tsunami has been devastating for me . But my association with sangams will stabilise my life”.



*“After  
the intervention  
of the federation with  
the Chief Minister of  
Pondicherry State, we  
were paid compensation.  
Sangam has been my  
sustained support  
to run my business”.*

## Selvi

Age: 48 yrs

Village: T.R.Pattinam

*Selvi is the quintessential strong fisherwoman. Her entire village calls her Padayappa based on the title of a Rajinikanth movie (a Tamil super hero who comes as an all powerful guy in the film). The nonchalant talker is also a original thinker. She has her own take on many things.*



Born in Akkaraipettai village, Selvi was married to Velayudham of T.R.Pattinam when she was twenty years old. Velayudham was one of the influential persons of the village. "He worked as the compounder in the GH during my marriage. Then he quit the job and bought a boat and was fishing. He was a very knowledgeable person, a great husband. Life was good when he was there". laments Selvi.

In 1995 Velayudham had high blood pressure and suffered a stroke. "I ran from hospital to hospital. I tried atleast to make him live even if he cannot work or even walk. Spent so much money by taking loans from everyone. But my misfortune he died at the end of a prolonged unsuccessful treatment".

When her husband passed away, she was a member of a women sangam at the village level. At that time there was no adequate savings in the sangam. Hence Selvi borrowed from her neighbours.

"With 5 children I was left in the lurch and to add to the miseries there was the loan looming large on us. I had been a housewife when he was alive. I didn't have a clue to manage a crisis of this proportion. My children were young and studying. People suggested that I send my child as a night watchman (Breaks into tears). People wrote us off and gave us such demeaning suggestions. I lifted the fish basket with a determination that only an insulted woman can nurture. I challenged this village silently. I've proved today that I've stood like a man or even more than that because men have women to support them but I stood on my own and have won. Life is not rosy now also, but it is certainly

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Moral and  
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came from the sangam".*

*“In all these  
years  
of struggles  
my sangam member  
Rani, has been  
the only closest friend  
who consoles me and  
encourages me  
when my own  
community looked down  
upon me”.*

peaceful. This was possible with the assistance I got from the SHG”

Selvi started selling fish in the Niravi market where she still sells fish. “Earlier I used to go twice a day and work as hard as possible. Now I go once”.

Selvi got her elder daughter married. Two of younger children one daughter and one son are in school. “Two elder sons are in to the fishing trade. I support them also. I bought them a fibre boat. But that met with an accident and broke. Misfortunes have been there all along. I’m paying back loans still. But because we have improved somewhat people talk that we have become wealthy. I only know the heat of the struggle that my life is”.

Selvi fell ill a year back and had to spend one lakh rupees for the treatment. But despite the haranguing process that life has been for her, Selvi is a very positive woman, courage personified.

“I joined the Renugadevi sangam seven years back and it has done good for me. We struggled for the Fisheries van which comes to pick up the women and drop them in the villages to sell fish. We struggled against the shrimp farms. I feel that such struggles have strengthened my resolve to struggle in my life against my problems. So far we have got the benefit of many revolving funds. First we got 25 thousands and then we got one lakh. I have borrowed from sangam and other sources for buying a boat. But for the loans provided by the sangam I would have had to borrow the entire amount from other sources for huge interest rates. It would have been a big burden for me paying the huge interest for the amount borrowed”.

Selvi has some critical insights into the SHG sector. “Our business is a seasonal fluctuating one, especially after the Tsunami it has become very unpredictable and down. Even if we take loan from the government at times of flood or disaster they waive it, but to SHG loans no such considerations are shown. I think that the government should accommodate the travails due to the natural calamities”.

Selvi has a broad outlook on life and issues like caste, morality

etc., "In all these years of struggle, the only closest loyal friend who stood by me like a rock is Rani. She is not from my community. She is a dalit. So, where does caste come in? She is the person who consoles me and encourages me when my own community looks down upon me".

As a single woman Selvi also has faced the ire of the men in the community who tried to seduce her and when she refused slandered her. "Men are like that. At times I feel that they are injustice personified. Even now when I'm this old, guys talk in a slant way with sexual overtones. But I don't yield. I give it back then and there. Thats why women call me Padayappa. They say that be careful otherwise Padayappa will hit back" she waves us off with a hearty laugh which echoes down the shore on which her hut is located. The last rays of the sun shine off Selvi's face a little proud to be alongside this remarkable woman.

## Issues and Concerns

The profiles of women have revealed many forms of violence experienced by them ranging from right to livelihood, denial of dignity, denial of access and control over labour; the women also experience domestic violence and in some of the cases, they were victims of sexual violence.

### Violence against women

The primary consequence of violence against women, even the threat of violence, is that it maintains women in a state of constant fear and vulnerability. Violence of all kinds deprives women of their autonomy and undermines their physical, psychological, and intellectual integrity. It prevents them from working, from being politically active, from having fun - in short, from living. This must be heard and understood in their life context. Violence against women is legitimized and generated by all forms of inequality, fanaticism, sexist discrimination, and the condition of inferiority and marginality in which society attempts to maintain women. Violence is the ultimate guarantee of women's oppression; at the same time, their unequal societies are the breeding grounds of sexist violence. The struggle against inequality is also a struggle against the legitimization of violence.

### The consequences of violence against women

They feel invaded in their private life spheres by the discussions on domestic violence especially physical abuse and marital rape. Issues of bigamy, low status of being a second wife, extra marital relationship of the spouses are prevalent in certain groups. The experiences of domestic violence on the lives of women victims remain same wherever the physical violence is correlated to alcoholic violence. A few women broke down when this issue was discussed. The entire being is profoundly shaken, with everything that was previously taken for granted now thrown into question. Paradoxically, whatever the circumstances or forms of violence women have suffered, they feel ashamed and guilty. Women feel ashamed for the invasion of their intimate beings, for being robbed of control and of their physical and psychological integrity.

*The struggle against inequality is also a struggle against legitimisation of violence as it deprives women's autonomy and integrity.*



They feel guilty for their supposed failure to offer resistance (the reality is always more complex than it appears).

### **Democratization of family**

By and large, there is still the expectation that women are solely responsible for domestic labour and for maintaining the rhythm of family life. Which means that the price they have to pay for some improved well-being, and increased self-respect and influence in household matters, is that of increasing their hours of work? Nevertheless, the price women have to pay for their successes is that of working longer hours. This is no doubt a critical weakness of the change in gender relations that poor women are going through, a weakness that will continue until the conjunction of domestic with other productive labour is challenged. But at another level, the compelling situations to take care of family needs for the men do arise during their hour long absence during sangam meetings /training programmes / participation in the struggles etc., and thus the federation members are in the process of democratising the family.

Yet another negative factor in the current changes in gender relations is the growth of dowry. This was mentioned by women in most of the group discussions. How the development of women as income-earners has led to a growth in dowry demands needs to be further analyzed.

*The price  
women have to pay  
for their success  
is that of long  
working hours.*

*In order to  
address this issue,  
the members are  
in the process of  
democratising the family.*



## Reflections

### What the Federation has meant to Women?

The analysis of the case - studies reveal that activities of the federation have an impact on women's say in household decision-making and their own well-being. Other areas of changes in women's agency and their position looked into are their interaction with officials, mobility, and dignity and self-esteem. The role of women's federation in promoting solidarity in supporting changes in household behaviour, particularly men's behaviour, is reported. Changes in men's attitudes are beginning to emerge, as also the effect of credit-related activities on women's livelihood needs. When we sum up, the changes are in terms of changes in gender relations, in particular, the articulation of new gender norms.

Based on coastal women's voices, we can view that, while there is no straightforward translation of micro-credit schemes or social action into changes in gender relations, there is, however, a continuous creation of new norms and social contexts, which amount to a change in their traditional status as dependants.

### What Constitutes a Change in Gender Relations?

We have discussed many changes in the condition of women – changes in well-being, ownership of fish vending assets, and so on. The gap between women and men in various spheres of social action and existence is beginning to decrease, towards weakening of the pre-existing form of patriarchy.

### Is there a Change in Gender Relations?

The rise of loan from SHGs has made women's income a permanent component of household income and weakened the women's dependency on the men as providers. The micro-credit financed activities of women are not just temporary or irregular. They have become an integral part of the household budget. The household's living standard, whatever it might be, depends in part at least, on this stream of income continuing. Thus, there is a

*Federations  
have facilitated  
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The gender gap  
that men are bread  
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has certainly been  
reduced.*

change in the picture of men being the breadwinners; which is one part of the gender relation, and women being dependents. There is a clear change in relation; the gender gap in the area of dependence has certainly been reduced.

The weakening of isolation as single women itself has been noticed in a number of ways – women's greater presence in the market as sellers, though only very restricted as sellers; women's participation in various types of public activities; women's unescorted movement, though often in a group and not alone, to the markets, to schools, to attend training, and so on that is likely to have a greater impact on seclusion norms. As pointed out, "When women engage in activities outside their households and/or villages, the increased interaction they have with the outside world goes a long way in empowering them." Nevertheless, we can see that there have been many changes in isolation and in their status.

### **New Norms**

Women's income-earning activities are now seen as a necessary part of household income, one that will continue to be so to meet household needs. After a decade of micro-credit based activity, there is no longer an idea that women's income-earning activities are temporary and reversible. In the context of changing norms, women's honour now lies in education, being mobile, and being able to work outside the house, take leadership in public struggles and collective participation for asserting their rights.

In the context of tsunami, the public efforts by the federation to provide social protection and rehabilitation package has changed the nature of vulnerability especially for single women. The actions that households take in relation to risk and uncertainty thus provide important insights into their capabilities and priorities. The extent to which they are able to take precautionary or reactive measures against crisis can be seen as one indicator of capability.

*The extent to which women are able to take precautionary or reactive measures against crisis can be seen as one indicator of Capabilities the women members of federation have developed in the context of Tsunami.*

## Conclusion

According to Nalini Nayak, the feminist perspective on fisheries valorizes women's labour in the artisanal sector and their contribution to the survival of the fishing community. It insists on the protection of subsistence production and sees all extended production only as built on subsistence production and denies the legitimacy of a production process which destroys the livelihood of coastal communities as well as fish resources. Women advocate nurture fisheries in the control of local communities in contrast to intensive aquaculture in private capitalist hands. To achieve a comprehensive change in fishing policies, women's participation in federation building and struggles is of crucial importance. Karaikal federation is moving towards that direction....

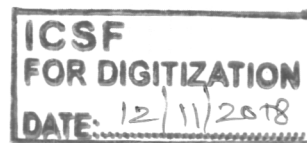
*To achieve  
a change in  
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## *Glossary*

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CBO	Community Based Organisation
DCR	Deputy Collector (Revenue)
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MNC	Multi National Corporations
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PWD	Public Works Department
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG	Self Help Group
SNEHA	Social Need Education and Human Awareness
SSCP	Sethusamudram Shipping Channel Project
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TR Pattinam	Thirumalai Rayan Pattinam
VCS	Village Coordination Sangam

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58/July 10  
with meals  
July 2010