

Women in Seafood Processing

A study carried out in Gujarat, India finds that changes in the infrastructure of seafood processing plants post globalization has not really changed the status of the women workers in the industry

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The seafood processing industry in India is almost entirely export-oriented and is spread across all the maritime states of the country. A total of 0.61 million metric tonnes valued at US\$1.8 billion was exported during 2006-07. With increasing consumer awareness about the quality of food, the demands of importing countries for safe and good quality products has also increased. This has led to considerable improvement in the infrastructure within the sector with plants upgrading to meet European Union (EU) and other international standards. Since women dominate the seafood processing sector, the impact this has had on women needs to be assessed. Has the improvement in quality standards had any effect on the working conditions of women? A study was undertaken in processing plants in Veraval,

where, for every man, two women are employed. Men also dominated the supervisory categories. At the managerial level, the participation of women was just four per cent. Women are also seen in the quality control sector mainly as technologists.

The quantum of work in the seafood industry is directly related to the availability of raw material and tends to be seasonal. In Gujarat, the peak period is from September to April and the lean season from June to August. The women who work in this sector come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and the average per capita monthly income of these families is Rs.1,483 (about US\$30). Sustainance of the family was the main reason cited for their taking up this employment and the women's share in the family income was, on average 42.5 per cent.

Studies in various other labour-intensive export-oriented sectors, like apparel and textiles, have shown that there is a distinct preference for young, unmarried women at the floor level. A similar trend was observed in the seafood processing industry—this study revealed that the average age of women workers was around 25 and that 63.28 per cent of the respondents were below 25 years of age.

Sixty-five per cent of the respondents had some level of schooling but many were dropouts. Out of the total respondents, 64.1 per cent of the women in processing units and 57.14 per cent of those in the pre-processing units, were single. This was despite the fact that almost all the pre-processing workers belonged to the same locality where the units were located. The majority of the workforce was thus without reproductive responsibilities. The average work experience was 2.6 and 3.8 years for processing and pre-processing workers respectively, substantiating the fact that women find it difficult to continue this work after marriage.

The dependence on large numbers of temporary women labour is one of the ways to reduce the cost of production and increase export-competitiveness. Increasing casualization of the workforce in export-oriented units as a result of the globalization of trade and increased global competition has been reported in studies in other developing countries as well. They reveal that the women are a generally low-paid and compliant workforce that helps these sectors to become highly competitive in the export market. The supply of this workforce is highly elastic and can be replaced continuously. The present study also reinforces this. It found that 88.39

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Women engaged in sorting at a fish processing plant, Veraval, Gujarat

Gujarat to explore this. The state's share in total exports was 30.71 per cent in terms of quantity and 15.12 per cent in terms of value in 2006-07. Twenty two of the total 64 processing units in Gujarat are EU-approved.

The distribution of workforce indicated that the participation of women was mostly confined to the floor level in unskilled work. Their participation in other higher categories involving decisionmaking is negligible. At the floor level, the male-female ratio in the processing sector is 1:1.74, with the ratio being higher for the contract or temporary category

per cent of the female workforce interviewed was in the contract or temporary category. Women who were permanent labour had an average experience of eight years. However, experience gained has not contributed to career advancement and most of them continue to do the same work they have been doing all these years.

Though the dependence on the contract workforce is high, the responsibility of the industry towards them is only partial as the main responsibility rests with the contractor or person who recruits them for the job. An important issue here is that of social security benefits. The responsibility to provide social security benefits, like the Provident Fund and the Employees' State Insurance Scheme, are mandatory on the part of the employer only in case of the regular employees. In the case of contract labour, the industry has no such responsibility—a fact confirmed by the present study. This has been one of the major effects of the casualization in the sector. There is also no job security and no assurance of work for the next season.

Migrant women's labour has been an integral part of the seafood processing sector. The present study observed that 46.1 per cent of the respondents were migrants, with almost two-thirds of migrants from the state of Kerala. There is a small but perceptible change from a few years ago when almost the entire migrant labour was from Kerala. Now, workers from Tamil Nadu and other states are also seeking employment in the sector. Among the migrants, 90 per cent were contract or temporary workers.

Migration is a serious issue, especially in the unorganized labour sector, as the women employed in these sectors can be subject to various forms and levels of exploitation. The generally exploited status of migrant workers in the seafood industry has been an area of study in many countries, especially in Asia. The migrant workers in India are protected under the 'Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979'. The Act applies to any establishment or contractor which/who employs five or more inter-State workers and ensures minimum wages, equality, health care, proper accommodation, protective clothing, displacement allowance at the time of recruitment, journey allowance and prevents gender discrimination. A court verdict in 1998, specifically for the women in the seafood processing sector, also ensures several statutory benefits.

The recruitment of migrant workers is usually done by contractors or agents who have a link with the processing units. According to the Act, all contractors must have valid licenses and must ensure that the women receive the

benefits assured under the Act. The contractors recruit the women after wage negotiations and the ultimate responsibility of the worker rests with the contractor and not with the industry. The wage is also generally routed through the contractor. In the present study, it was observed that the women received the allowances during journey as well as for displacement. However, the extent of allowance actually received by the women could not be ascertained. Since most of the migrant workers come under the temporary category they received no other social security benefits, though they were provided a medical check up before the start of the season, mandatory for EU-approved units. Accommodation in the form of dormitories within the factory premises, housing six persons in a room, are provided with minimum facilities like bedding and space for keeping their personal belongings.

The average monthly wage received by the women workers at the floor level in the processing sector is Rs.2594 (about US\$52), and in the pre-processing sector it was Rs.2525 (about USD 50). The wages conform to the Minimum Wages prescribed for the fisheries and seafood industry in Gujarat under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. However, an interesting point to note is that the wage is just the minimum that the Act prescribes. No gender-based wage differential was observed in this sector. One of the reasons could be that men and women are not engaged in comparable jobs. Women are engaged in processing activities while men are assigned jobs in other supervisory and higher categories. Low-end jobs for men include loading and unloading, packing, transportation etc. which are considered 'heavy jobs' that women cannot undertake. Therefore, the segregation in the job seems to be the main reason for the absence of a wage differential.

About 99 per cent of the respondents felt that the work environment has improved significantly with the changes taking place in the export-oriented seafood processing units. The improvement in working conditions has been a direct result of the quality compliance requirements of importing countries that has forced the sector to make such improvements.

Annual health check ups for women at the floor level is mandatory for EU-approved units, to be arranged by the employers as per quality assurance requirements, with the health card to be maintained by the employer. All the respondents confirmed the health check up before the start of the season, after which 58.73 per cent of the respondents underwent a check up every month, while for the rest it was once in two or three months.

Majority of the labour force reported poor job satisfaction and continue to work because of family compulsions as their income is a major

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source of sustenance for the family. Though the income the women earn is a significant contributor to the family income, they have no role in deciding the family expenditure. It was either the father or husband who decided matters in the family.

According to the United Nations, the quality of employment and conditions of work includes regularity of employment, social protection, working hours, intensity of work, and possibility of career advancement or skill upgrading. Laws

are already in place to protect the women from exploitation and ensure fair wages and social security. A proactive implementation strategy can ensure that the benefits are actually passed on to the female workforce, including to contract labour. Employment in the sector *per se* has not led to any true empowerment of the women or ensured gender equality. The women have weak bargaining power and find it difficult to counter the producers' attempts to depress wages. ❏