

# Fighting for space

**Efforts to form a union of women in small-scale fish vending in Gujarat, India, promise to go a long way in addressing the problems of lack of space and facilities that these women face**

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When you first met Hansaben and Shailesh, the two young and cheerful community organisers from the coastal town of Veraval in Gujarat, India, appear to be simple and shy. They have been part of an organization called Jan Jagruti Manch (People's Awareness Forum) since they were adolescents, and have witnessed their families fight against powerful influential leaders of the *Kharava caste panchayat* (fishing communities' traditional institution). In continuing this struggle against existing traditional systems, they are trying to organize small-scale fishers. Hansaben is at the forefront in organizing women vendors and women fish processors employed in fish processing plants at Veraval. The National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), and Program for Social Action (PSA) have all supported these efforts, with inputs from International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

Our meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night. Many of them had returned from fish processing work, had their bath and finished their house work before rushing to the meeting. In earlier meetings, Hansaben had tried to teach the women how to sign their names. But the women had become suspicious of this activity, and

some women had stopped attending meetings. Even so, 60 women gathered for this meeting and shared their experiences. They were all resident of Beria in Veraval, from the traditional *Kharava* community. Almost half the women gathered worked in fish processing plants. They explained that although they did not face the same problems that migrant fish workers face, they were concerned about low wages, job insecurity, the absence of social security measures like provident fund and health insurance, and about workplace safety and working conditions, including lack of protective gear like gloves and gumboots. Some expressed fears over forming a union, as employers were bound to retaliate against such efforts. An NFF representative at the meeting shared experiences of organizing trade unions for women in the south Indian state of Kerala, and talked about the benefits of such efforts. The women appeared to appreciate the importance of unions and expressed a desire to form a trade union of their own.

Over the days that followed, Hansaben accompanied me on visits to fish markets in Veraval and Porbandar. There are two main fish markets in Veraval. Fisher's Colony Market is the oldest. A new fish market at Bheria is getting built at the original market site, so currently vendors sit in a nearby area. They have been waiting for the past two years for the new market to be constructed, sitting out in the sun, and watching both their fish stock and their health deteriorate. The market is for both wholesale and retail fish trade. Women generally get fish from wholesalers in the market in the morning, and sell their stock through the day. Many women could be seen standing with small buckets of fish for sale. Hansaben said that the local Corporation (local body) had not consulted the nearly 300 vendors while planning for a new market. As the women were not organized, they were not able to follow up with the Corporation's plans or time frame to finish construction of the market.

A visit to another market in Bheria revealed the same situation for women vendors. Here the women did not even have a demarcated market space to call their own. They were vending in the streets for the last 15 years. There were presently 200 vendors, and for a few hours in the evening, the whole street was flooded with vendors and customers. Older vendors had, over the years, made temporary structures with fish baskets,

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Hansaben with women fishworkers attending meeting at Veraval, Gujarat, India. Meeting with the women of Jan Jagruti Manch started at nine in the night

thermocool boxes and wooden planks to display their fish, while new vendors stood around the plastic baskets in which their fish was kept. A senior vendor we talked with raised concerns over the recent growth in the number of vendors, due to which older vendors were losing both customers and work. She also feared that the Corporation planned to shift vendors to another area altogether. Most of the women were young, and there were even some children among them, trying to sell a few crabs.

The next day Hansaben and I went to Porbander, another coastal town in Gujarat and the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. We visited the wholesale fish market in the morning and the retail market in the afternoon. Earlier this was a single market where wholesale and retail fish trade carried on side by side. After the Porbander Corporation built a new fish market at a distance from the original market site, wholesalers chose to auction their stock on the busy streets that were easier to access. As is the case of small-scale fish vending across Gujarat, fish was stocked on the sides of the streets, without ice and under the scorching sun. The crowd of vendors and customers in the narrow streets made it difficult for

people to walk. Accidents were common in this market. The market was said to be controlled by a woman with the reputation of being a '*gunda*' (antisocial element) who exercised every possible means to maintain her control. The women here would not even to dare to speak of organizing.

The retail fish market was a well-built structure with separate *galas* (sections) for each vendor. The vendors however chose to sit on the ground in the open areas under the scorching sun, atop their usual thermocool boxes and wooden planks. They said that the space they had been given was too small to accommodate their wares. They were also angry that the Municipal Corporation had shifted them from their original space to this new fish market. There were far fewer customers coming to this market. In protest, they have been refusing to pay taxes to the Municipal Corporation. Life is hard for these women whether in fish processing industries or in fish markets. People like Hansaben and Shailesh are trying to organise them into a trade union. A collective union forum will no doubt help them in being able to negotiate with the local Municipal Corporations and Fisheries Departments to gain more control over their livelihood. ❏

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