

Changing tides

Labour shortage has improved work conditions for women in seafood processing in Kerala, India, although gender equality in employment is still a distant dream

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Seafood processing factories all over the world are dependent on women's labour. India is no exception. The work in the factories is generally monotonous and full of drudgery. The work environment is not very comfortable, as the workplace temperature and conditions are geared to maintain the quality of the product. Almost all the women are engaged on a contractual basis, with the piece rated daily wages regulated by the number of 'baskets' they process. Men are more likely than are women, to have permanent jobs and higher wages in these factories.

The labour force in the initial decades of growth of the seafood processing sector in India largely came from the southern state of Kerala. This was the situation even as late as until the late 1990s and early 2000s. The women were recruited by labour contractors, and taken to work in factories in other coastal states. The exploitative conditions of their work have been reported in many studies. The situation started changing towards the end of the last millennium. In many states, local women came into the sector and began seeking employment. This suited the factory management as the additional expense on providing logistic facilities reduced. However in Kerala, with lower participation of local women in this work, the fish processing factories were faced with severe labour shortages. To keep the factories functional, women workers had to be brought in from other states. Initially they were organized through labour contractors, or through friends already working in the state. Most of these women did not have the requisite skills to work in the factories. This led to special job training programmes organized by the factory management. Lack of good skills can lead to loss of production and value. It is pertinent to note that despite the high skill requirements, at no time has adequate recognition been given to the women or to their work in this sector.

The changing dynamics of labour availability in the fish processing sector in Kerala has changed the tide in favour of women workers. Though wages cannot

be called 'high', they have improved. The migrant women are paid, on an average, Rs 5700 (USD 88.8) per month, and the local women, slightly higher wages at Rs 6500 (USD 101.2) per month. Most factories provide accommodation, transportation, and food at subsidized rates, or facilities for cooking, to their workers. The accommodation usually comes with proper toilet facilities (about one toilet for four workers) and certain basic features, including television sets. Factories incur additional investments for training migrant labour, and in order to prevent 'poaching' of trained workers, management usually has to keep the labour force content. These conditions apply to the seafood processing sector in Kerala, and, in the absence of adequate information, whether similar conditions obtain in other parts of India is difficult to say.

The major factor responsible for the improvement of employment conditions for women has been the shortage of labour in the sector. Further, the requirements of certifications and audits in export factories also include adherence to some minimum labour standards, and this again gets reflected in positive changes in working conditions. Women workers are aware of their improved bargaining capacity, and are able to use this to better their situation.

According to a recent study, migrant women from other states accounted for more than 75 per cent of the labour force in export oriented seafood processing factories in the Ernakulam-Alappuzha belt of Kerala. Around 85 per cent of the migrant women were single and the average age was around 21 years. Most of the women did not return to work after marriage.

In contrast, the average age of local women employed in the sector was around 40 years. Younger women were reluctant to seek employment in the sector. The local women workers were still considered very efficient and skilled. They did not work night shifts. In case work required them to stay late or work night shifts, transportation was provided by the factories.

The study showed however that women continued to earn less than men; and migrant women earned less than local women. Men earned an average of Rs 7600 (USD 118.4) per month, or about 17 per cent more than the local women, and 34 per cent more than the migrant women workers. ■