

PROFILE

An independent life! For Metty, a fisherwoman from Kerala, India, fishing has been a mainstay for over four decades

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Metty

Metty is a 59-year-old fisherwoman. She lives in Pallithode, on the Ernakulam-Alappuzha border of the South Indian state of Kerala. Her late husband was a marine fisherman who passed away seven years ago. She has three married sons, none of whom fish. They pick up construction work, driving assignments and other odd jobs. One of Metty's daughters-in-law works in a nearby peeling shed. Her other daughters-in-law take care of the domestic work at home.

Metty has been fishing for 45 years. She is part of a group of ten to fifteen men and women who go fishing in the tributaries

and *kettu* (dams) of the Vembanad estuarine system in and around Pallithode. The group starts out for the fishing grounds early in the morning. Metty does not have too many domestic responsibilities in the early hours as the younger women at home take care of those. She leaves home after a morning brew of black tea. The group walk to the fishing grounds, traversing about five kilometres daily.

Fishing takes place all year round, and men and women carry out different types of fishing. The men fish using heavy cast nets, which women find difficult to handle. Metty herself uses rudimentary fishing implements like the scoop net or *vattavala* which is used to scoop fish. The fishing period is roughly divided into two phases. When the dam area or *kettu* is being operated for fish culture privately by individual owners, the women fish in the feeder canals from where water is regulated into the *kettu*. Metty and other

women in the group are also employed by the owners during the fish harvest season to catch and sort the fish. When they help harvest fish from the *kettu*, they receive a third of the catch as their share.

Once the harvest is over, Metty and others again have free access to the *kettu* and can fish there till the next season starts. During this time, they are entitled to all of the catch. This activity is regulated by the ebb and flow of water in the *kettu*. Usually the depth of the water can range from two to five feet. Metty changes into her work clothes and enters the slushy waters of the *kettu*. Initially, she starts to scoop with her net and then shifts to using her hands and legs. Moving the legs in the slush, she disturbs the fish, and once she senses their movement, she grabs the fish with her hands. The fish is slopped into aluminium pots that float on the surface of the water, loosely tethered to her waist. Such aluminium pots, being more durable, have replaced the earthen pots and bamboo baskets used earlier.

The income from fishing is highly variable. As Metty says, "On some days I get Rs 500 (USD) worth fish in ten minutes. On others, I may spend the whole day fishing and not get anything."

The younger generation is not interested in continuing with this activity. Says Metty, "They don't like to step into the slushy waters to catch fish." Metty however cannot imagine a single day without fishing, a livelihood she first took up at the age of 14. She attributes her fitness to this daily physical labour. Metty usually finishes her fishing by 8 am, and by 9, she is off to the market to sell her catch. She returns home about an hour later, and the rest of the time is hers to spend as she pleases, for instance, with her grandchildren.

Metty is an economically independent and strong woman. She is the sole decision maker regarding what to do with her income. When she cannot fish, she takes loans from private moneylenders and has always been able to repay it from her fishing income. ❏