

Roadmap for survival

In a two-day interactive workshop, women fishworkers in Kolkata, India, discussed strategies for future struggle and organizing

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The contribution of women fishworkers in India has been at least equal to that of men. However, despite being a colossal human resource that plays a significant role in food security, income and employment generation, women have been systematically discriminated against, both socially and economically.

Based in West Bengal in India, the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), a fishworkers' organization, has been facing many difficulties in mobilizing women workers. At a time when we are witnessing an all round attack on natural resource based livelihood options, including fishing, the mobilization of women fishworkers to protect water, fish and fisherpeople is of critical importance.

Experience has taught the DMF that in order to build independent women fishworker's organizations, two factors are important: one, the identification of the problems that women face both as fishworkers and as women, as well as the means to address these problems; and two, the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

In that context, the DMF organised two workshops with women fishworker activists. The first was held in collaboration with the Rabindra Bharati University on 30-31

March 2016; and the second was organized at Namkhana in West Bengal on 1-2 June 2017. These two workshops were complementary in their aims. The first tried to identify the problems faced by women fishworkers and means to address the problems. The second tried to identify the importance of building a separate organization for women fishworkers.

Building on the observations, findings and recommendations of the workshops, the DMF then organized a state level workshop on 15-16 June 2017, at Seva Kendra in Kolkata, in collaboration with two organizations, DISHA and ActionAid. Titled 'Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive,' the workshop witnessed the participation of 40 women fishworker representatives from six districts of West Bengal, three women fishworker leaders from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, four representatives from ActionAid and DISHA, and eight office bearers of DMF and its branches.

The inaugural session was chaired by the President of DISHA, Santanu Chacraverti. Welcoming the participants, Sasanka Dev, Secretary of DISHA, pointed out that such workshops were very important to develop a better understanding of the issues that women fishworkers face. Following a round of self-introduction by the participants, Milan Das, General Secretary, DMF, delivered the opening address for the workshop. He highlighted the activities pursued by the DMF in organizing the women fishworkers in West Bengal, emphasizing the important role played by women activists. Next, Jesu Rethinam, a woman fishworker leader from Tamil Nadu, spoke on the national perspective of the women fishworkers' struggle. She stressed upon the need for strengthening their struggles at the national level and listed out several impending threats to the livelihood of fishworkers, including the dilution of the Coastal Regulation Zone 2011 Notification, which provided fishing communities a measure of protection; development measures such as the creation of industrial and economic corridors along the coasts; and the Sagarmala project, a port modernization venture. The session concluded with an address by the session chair.

The next session, on livelihood issues and concerns, was chaired by Shilpa Nandy, Executive Member, DISHA. Two presentations were made. The first discussed the findings

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Inaugural session of the workshop on Women Fishworkers in West Bengal—Road Map for the Struggle to Survive, 15-16 June 2017, Kolkata, India

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of a primary study conducted on women fishworkers in West Bengal. The second discussed the conclusions of the two workshops held earlier on women fishworkers' issues. Pradip Chatterjee made the first presentation. He presented the main findings of the study, which included the status of women fishworkers and the problems they face at different levels, for example, with respect to family, society, education, financial inclusion, income, occupation and self-organization. Shilpa Nandy, who made the second presentation, pointed out that the two earlier workshops were actually complementary to each other: one came out with detailed recommendations on the demands of different categories of women fishworkers, while the other detailed the need for separate organizational initiatives for women fishworkers to carry forward their demands.

The next session started with the screening of a documentary on the women canoe fishers of Kultoli that depicted the lives and livelihood struggles of women fishing in the difficult waters of the mangrove-rich Sundarbans, who face the risk of tiger and crocodile attacks on the one hand, and of torture and harassment by staff of the forest department, on the other.

The third session, chaired by Manasi Bera, Executive Member, DMF, was on organizational issues and concerns. Milan Das introduced the idea of a separate women's organization and the possible forms such an organization might take. After that, the women

fishworker participants joined a group exercise on organizational planning. The participants formed themselves into four groups, according to their occupational categories, to work out suggestions and recommendations with respect to possible organizational forms for women fishworker organizations to take up their issues.

Thereafter, these groups presented their main suggestions. These included forming women fishworker organizations in various occupational sectors with the exclusive or main participation of women; forming women fishworker platforms at all organizational levels of and in all areas covered by the DMF, and also, the need for adequate and effective representation of women in the various DMF committees.

Pradip Chatterjee, in a special rejoinder, recalled the experience of women's participation in the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) and the efforts taken by leaders like Thomas Kochery and Harekrishna Debnath in the matter. He also pointed out some of the limitations that may be encountered in the effort and commented on the role that women's organizations can play in producing and activating women's leadership in both fishworkers' unions and in society at large. He stressed however that the issue has political and cultural significance and linkages, and that these need to be understood by the women leaders.

Manasi Bera ended the session with concluding remarks. ❖