

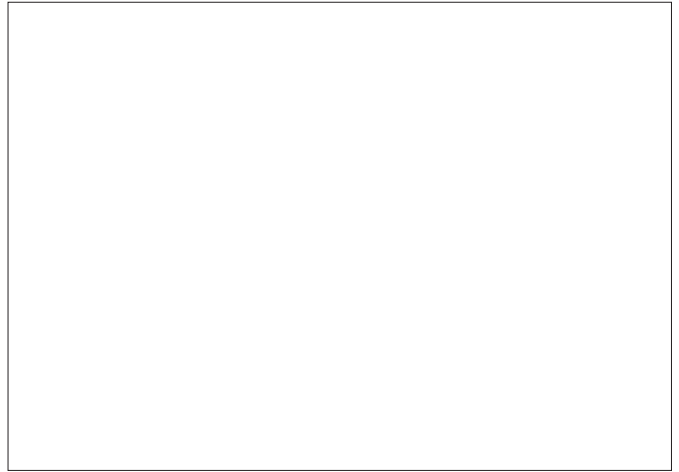
samudra

D  
O  
S  
S  
I  
E  
R

**Women in Fisheries Series  
No. 1**

**Public Hearing on the Struggles of  
Women Workers in the  
Fish Processing Industry in India**

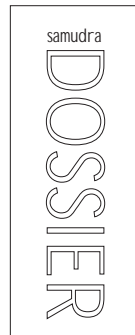
**23 and 24 June 1995  
Cochin, Kerala, India**



**International Collective in Support of Fishworkers  
27 College Road, Chennai 600 006, India**

# Contents

Preface .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Document I The Seafood Processing Industry and the Conditions of Migrant Women Processing Works .....	5
Document II Oral Testimonies of Women Workers .....	30
Document III Personal Responses from the Members of the Jury .....	41
Document IV Verdict of the Jury .....	45
Document V Plans for Follow-up Action by the National Fishworkers' Forum .....	50



**Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1**


## Preface

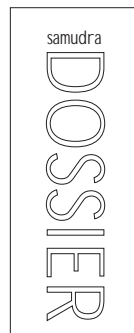
One of the prime concerns of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) is to place the issues and problems of artisanal fishworkers on the development agenda of international fisheries programmes. Within this context, the plight of women fishworkers has received special attention.

Despite the fact that women play an important role in artisanal fisheries, they remain invisible. Hence, their contribution to the sector and their struggle for survival remain unnoticed. This deliberate insomnia regarding women's role in fisheries has had its impact on the 'maldevelopment' of fisheries.

Therefore, in trying to help develop a global policy on sustainable fisheries development, ICSF has clearly realized the need to make the role of women in fisheries more visible. It is equally concerned about how the existing spaces they occupy could be safeguarded. It was therefore decided to initiate, within fishworker organizations themselves, the debate on gender, that is, the role of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour.

In 1993, ICSF initiated a process of this nature among fishworker organizations in selected countries, namely, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Senegal, Spain, France and Canada, to begin with.

As part of a planned series on Women in Fisheries, SAMUDRA DOSSIER will document some of the information, findings and analyses gathered during this process. The order in which the dossiers are published is no indication of the priority or weightage given to a particular issue but is a mere result of the nature of the issue and the time needed to document it. 



**Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1**

## Introduction

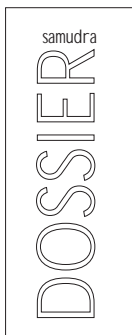
This Samudra Dossier on Women in Fisheries focuses on the Public Hearing on the 'Struggles of Women Workers in the Fish Processing Industry in India', held at Cochin, Kerala, India on 23 and 24 June 1995.

All over the world, most workers in the fish processing industry are women. This has been so all through history, both in the artisanal and the modern sectors of the fishery. Although generally a very labour-intensive industry, it is mainly in the modern processing industry that migrant female labour have been so extensively utilized. Migrant labourers are a very vulnerable section of the working class—more so when they are women and particularly when they are young and unmarried.

With the establishment of the fish processing industry in India in the early 1970s—initially in a crude, merchant-capital form—the problems of migrant female labour began to hit the headlines. This encouraged researchers and women's groups to look into the issue. But nothing could be done to really change the situation for the women. Over the years, the industry has modernized and, in some ways, the plight of the workers has improved marginally in some plants. Yet, in no case do the women workers get the benefits they are entitled to by law.

In 1993, the National Fishworker's Forum (NFF)—an independent union of artisanal fishworkers' organizations—decided to take up the cause of these workers. The women's wing in the NFF, aided by ICSF's women members, investigated the problems and made contacts with the women, most of whom migrate from artisanal fishing villages in the coastal state of Kerala in south India.


Realizing that this issue needed to be first publicized and also realizing that it was essential to ensure the involvement of different sections of people related to the migrant labour sector, the NFF decided to organize a Public Hearing of these workers. This took place in Cochin, Kerala on 23 and 24 June

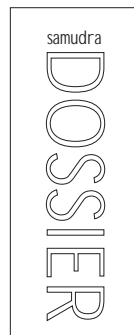


1995, the lean season in the processing plants and the time when the women workers return to Kerala on vacation. Around 250 persons from eight States of India took part in the two-day meet, which also attracted media attention.

The NFF organized the hearing in the presence of an eminent jury, comprising Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer and Justice Janakiamma and two very able and active human rights lawyers, Indira Jaisingh and Nandita Haksar. The proceedings of the hearing included :

- a presentation on the fish processing industry in India
- oral testimonies of the workers
- clarifications by the jury and members of the audience
- the judgement of the jury

Subsequently, the NFF decided on follow-up actions so that some sort of solution could be found for the issue. 





# Document I

## The Seafood Processing Industry and the Conditions of Migrant Women Processing Workers

by  
Aleyamma Vijayan, Country Co-ordinator,  
Women in Fisheries Programme, ICSF

### PART I

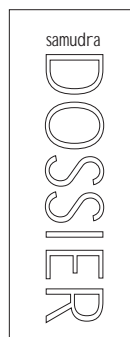
#### The Seafood Processing Industry

##### 1. Background

**M**odern fish processing developed in India during the 1960s. Prior to that, traditional processing facilities comprised largely of sun drying, 'wet' (drip) drying or dry curing with or without salt. Prawns were mashed into pulp and sometimes partially dried and packed in sealed tins. While a portion of the processed products found a domestic market supported by low-income consumers, the rest was exported to Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Hongkong, Sri Lanka, the UK and some other European countries. The dried products included fish like Bombay duck, ribbon fish, silver bellies, shark, tuna, catfish, mackerel and prawns.

As the supply of ice increased, the quantum of fresh fish handled also went up. The fresh fish marketed increased from 48 per cent in 1961 to 70 per cent in 1966. Over these years, the quantity cured dropped from 43 per cent to 22 per cent, while that reduced to oil, manure, etc. decreased from 8 per cent to 4 per cent (Table 1).

Freezing and canning began in India in a small way in 1963. As trawling picked up, prawn landings increased significantly, particularly in the south-west coast. The state governments provided enormous subsidies and funding assistance to introduce trawlers, and to build infrastructure facilities like ice plants and cold storages, fishing harbours and landing centres for the hygienic handling of the catches.



Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1

**Table 1**  
**Utilization of Fish Landings in India**

Year	Landings (lakh tonne)	Marketing fish %	Curing %	Freezing %	Canning %	Reduction to other forms %	Total
1961	9.6	47.9	43.7	-	-	8.30	100
1962	97	48.4	43.3	-	-	8.20	100
1963	10.4	67.3	26.9	0.38	0.10	4.80	100
1964	13.2	69.7	22.0	1.21	0.24	4.86	100
1965	13.3	68.4	25.5	1.35	0.38	4.10	100
1966	13.7	70.9	21.9	1.90	0.57	4.70	100

**Sources:**

Govindan T.K.: Application of Technology in Optimum Utilization of the Fishery Resources of India. FAO, 1966.

CIFT, Cochin : Proceedings of the symposium on Living Resources of the Seas Around India.

Lured by the impetus produced by the public sector, private entrepreneurs entered the fishery sector in a big way, with massive capital inputs to undertake trawling and organize modern processing facilities like ice-cum-refrigeration plants and cold storages. The spurt in frozen and canned prawn products, coupled with a number of parameters like rich prawn resources, attractive foreign markets in the US and Japan and government subsidies and bank credits, paved the way for the emergence of a modern prawn processing and export industry in India since the mid-1960s.

In 1963, the total seafood exports of the country stood at 17,908 tonnes valued at Rs.5.86 crores (1 crore = 10 million). Frozen shrimps constituted 22 per cent of the produce and 36 per cent of the seafood export earnings. The rest comprised largely of dried products (Table 2).

By 1971-72, the foreign trade in marine products rose by 98 per cent in terms of quantity and 660 per cent in terms of value. Frozen shrimp then made up 70 per cent of the produce and 83 per cent of the value of exports. The other frozen items like lobster tails, frog legs and quality fish comprised five per cent in quantity and six per cent in export earnings. Canned and



**Table 2**  
**Seafood Export Trade in India**

Product		1963	1971-7 2	1981-8 2	1991-92
1. Frozen shrimp	Q	3 967	24952	52180	76151
	V	21204	370993	2479500	9791166
2. Frozen lobster	Q		347	694	1628
	V		13648	51500	553070
3. Frozen frog legs	Q		1367	4065	-
	V		12819	112000	
4. Fresh/frozen	Q		28	6760	49333
	V		120	96200	1431964
5. Frozen cuttle	Q			1819	12347
	V			45548	609109
6. Frozen squids	Q			1387	25529
	V			17400	1093810
7. Canned shrimp	Q	1231	1581	82	
	V	7576	25179	4200	
8. Dried fish	Q	NA	6278	1022	2466
	V		14270	7400	35117
9. Dried shrimp	Q	2809	418	-	-
	V	9325	2295	-	-
10. Shark fish/ fish maws	Q	NA	297	359	317
	V		5125	373000	89574
11. Misc. items	Q	9901	255	1737	3959
	V	20541	1020	13300	155098
Total	Q	17908	35523	70105	171820
	V	58646	445469	2860100	13758908

Q - Tonnes V - Rs. '000

dried shrimp together constituted seven per cent in quantity and six per cent in value. Dried fish products accounted for 18 per cent of quantity and three per cent of value. Shark fins and fish-meal also appeared in a small way.

By 1991-92, frozen shrimp exports further improved significantly—the increase was 109 per cent in quantity and 568 per cent in value. While new items like frozen cuttlefish/fillets and frozen squid were added to the list of exports, dried shrimp totally disappeared from the export basket. Frozen shrimp then made up 45 per cent in quantity and 71 per cent in value. The other frozen items like lobster tails, cuttlefish and squid, constituted 51 per cent in quantity and 27 per cent in value. Dried and other miscellaneous products figured at four per cent of the produce and two per cent of the value. The principal markets for the different seafood products have been Japan, the US, the European Union and Australia.

Some broad indications of the markets are given below:

**Table 3**  
**Market Share of Indian Seafood Exports (Percentage)**

		1970	1980	1990
Japan	Q	18.0	50.0	30.4
	V	29.9	68.6	54.0
U.S.A	Q	47.8	10.3	11.1
	V	47.3	9.2	11.3
France	}			
Netherlands	}Q	5.0	11.2	12.5
U.K.	}V	7.3	10.1	12.3
Belgium	}			
Australia	Q	2.0	0.6	0.5
	V	3.1	0.9	0.4
Sri Lanka	Q	19.2	5.5	1.9
	V	5.0	0.8	0.5
Others	Q	8.0	22.4	43.6
	V	7.4	10.4	21.5
Total	Q	100.0	100.0	100.0
	V	100.0	100.0	100.0

Q: Quantity    V: Value

Source: Marine Products Export Development Authority, Cochin, India

## 2. Role of MPEDA and other functional agencies

### 2.1 MPEPC

The Marine Products Export Promotion Council (MPEPC) was set up jointly in 1961 by the government of India and exporters of marine products. Its objective was to promote the export of marine products.

Its activities included:

- development of export-oriented production sector of the Indian seafood industry;
- helping to solve problems faced by the industry; and
- promotion of publicity for exports.

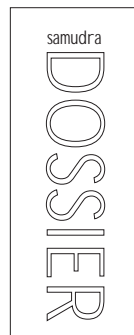
### 2.2 MPEDA

The Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) was established in 1972 under the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, as the national agency for the development, regulation and control of the Indian seafood industry. The membership of the Authority comprised representatives of the Union Ministries of Commerce, Finance, Agriculture, Industry and Shipping, both the Houses of Parliament, maritime State Governments, the seafood industry and research institutions.

Services rendered by MPEDA:

MPEDA provides a range of services to the industry, covering practically every phase of production and marketing, be it financial, technical or legal:

- financial assistance and subsidies
- market research
- research and product development
- prawn farming
- quality control
- publicity and public relations



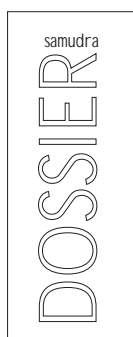
The role of MPEDA in the overall fisheries development has been spelt out in Section 9(i) of the Act constituting the authority. It is an autonomous body operating between the government and industry, which

- provides practical, specialized business approach to the development of the fishing and fish processing industry;
- exercises executive powers to act more quickly and with greater flexibility than regular government departments;
- influences private enterprises to increase their contribution to the development of fisheries;
- supplies key information on fisheries development overseas through liaison with similar organizations abroad;
- identifies and evaluates industry incentives likely to stimulate growth;
- promotes exports of fishery products;
- finds appropriate solutions for organizational and technical problems in export marketing; and
- evaluates the commercial and economic advantages and disadvantages of new fishery development proposals.

### 2.3 Central Ministry for Food Processing Industry

The Central Ministry for Food Processing Industry was set up with the responsibility for the development of the deep-sea fishing industry. This Ministry has accorded top priority for the creation of an institutional framework for all agencies involved in deep-sea fishing and fish processing. Although the industry is of the view that all activities connected with deep-sea fishing and fish processing should be administered by one ministry, the fact is the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Commerce, besides the Ministry of Food Processing, compete with one another to retain control of operations in deep-sea fishing.

According to the Food Processing Ministry, it is answerable to Parliament for all decisions relating to the deep-sea fishing ventures. However, it will not handle any projects or ventures



involving foreign equity, which now go directly to the Foreign Investment Promotion Board in the Prime Minister's Office.

The Ministry of Food Processing Industries has made a major contribution to the deep-sea fishing sector by granting certain subsidies and is giving a fillip to joint ventures, leases and test fishing in India's Exclusive Economic Zone.

#### 2.4 Private entrepreneurs:

Initially, the fishing and fish processing industry was largely confined to traditional fishing communities. With the advent of modernization, private entrepreneurs took up mechanized fishing, especially shrimp trawling, since the mid-1960s. Soon a modern shrimp processing industry was established along the coastal belt of the maritime states. Although the government initially set up a few processing plants in the public sector, the private sector, lured by the prospects of high profits, soon became the most dominant force in the fisheries arena.

Seafood that was traditionally processed was now diverted to the modern industry. This was encouraged by the demand for frozen and canned seafood from the developed world.

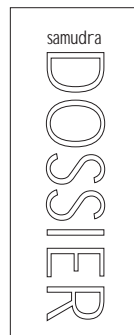
While the majority of the export companies are small firms with minimum capital inputs, the trade is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals or companies. The prices of products, which are determined by international market conditions, therefore fluctuate.

In 1981, India accounted for 10 per cent of the world production of shrimp. In 1989, its share was reduced to nine per cent. The total marine exports from India comprised 3.5 per cent of the total value of exports from the country in 1980-81. By 1990-91, the share had declined to 2.8 per cent, although the total marine product exports rose nearly fourfold.

### 3. Concentration of exports

The Seafood Export Journal reported in January 1979 that there were 180 full-time members and 20 associate members (200 in all) in the Seafood Exporters Association of India. The state-wise distribution is given in Table 4.

While the seafood exporters in the country were reported to number around 560 in 1992, those in Kerala increased to 124,



**Table 4**  
**Seafood Exporters (1979)**

State	No. of Exporters	Percentage
Kerala	116	58.0
Karnataka	10	5.0
Goa	3	1.5
Maharashtra	28	14.0
Gujarat	3	1.5
Tamilnadu	24	12.0
Andhra Pradesh	5	0.5
Orissa	1	0.5
West Bengal	10	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

representing a share of 22 per cent. The number of exporting firms in other states went up fivefold. It is reported that at present Maharashtra has the maximum number of seafood exporters.

The port-wise shares of the products are given in Table 5.

Over the years, the relative share of Kerala in marine products exports declined in quantity from 52 per cent to 24 per cent and in value from 57 per cent to 23 per cent. The share of Maharashtra too declined both in quantity and value. However, the importance of the exports from the east coast grew significantly over the years.

#### **4. Forms of production in the processing sector, with special reference to shrimp**

By 1970, India had different categories of enterprises in the production and export business. These are indicated in Table 5.

1. Producer-cum-processor-cum-exporter
2. Processor-cum-exporter
3. Processor (processing and freezing)

**Table 5**  
**Port-wise Exports**

	1974		1984		1992-93	
	Q	V	Q	V	Q	V
Cochin	52	57	34	36	24	23
Bombay	21	12	18	15	18	12
Madras	7	11	9	10	9	13
Visakhapatnam	1	1	5	10	5	16
Calcutta	2	3	5	9	5	11
Porbander			2	3	13	6
Kandla					8	4
Jawaharlal Nehru				8	6	
Goa			2	2	2	2
Tuticorin	3	1	12	2	6	6
Other ports	14	15	13	13		1
Total						
Q (Tonnes)		46629		89912		208602
V (Rs. '00000)		7631.27		3854983		176743

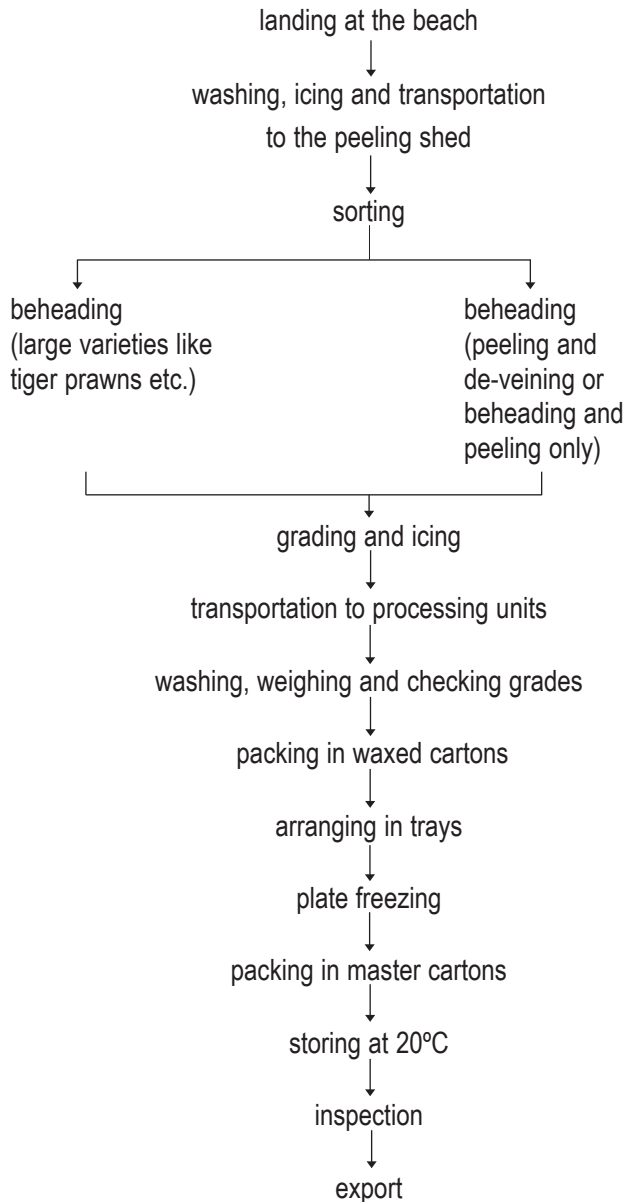
#### 4. Exporter

Shrimps are procured for processing in various ways, as outlined below:

- a. If the processor is also the owner of fishing fleets, all the export varieties come to his factory.
- b. Merchants who own lorries or insulated vans buy raw materials from small producers and supply them to the factories.
- c. Peeling shed owners buy the raw materials, pre-process it (peeling, de-veining, etc.) and deliver it to the freezing plants.

Precise figures are not available on the total number of processing and freezing units in the country. Some states have published the number of processing units, but since this also includes ice plants and cold storages, one can not clearly assess the number of plants which process shrimp.

## Flow chart of freezing of fresh shrimps



MPEDA, through a notification in 1980, has asked all peeling sheds and processing units to register with it, under the MPEDA Act 1972 Section 3(1). It laid down minimum sanitary and hygienic standards to be followed by peeling sheds to qualify themselves for registration. Until 1982, 176 peeling sheds were



registered in Kerala. It is said that around another 300 are functioning without registration. According to statistics published by the Kerala Fisheries Department in 1989, Kerala has 410 processing and preservation units, of which 18 are co-operative sector plants. Out of the 392 plants in the private sector, 90 are freezing plants, 21 are canning plants and 281 are ice plants and cold storages.

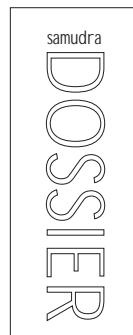
The fisheries statistics of Maharashtra for 1990-91 show that there are 127 'merchant exporters' under the Registered Export Policy and 37 'manufacturer exporters' under the REP licence scheme.

The Seafood Export Journal of September 1993 states that "there are 270 processing plants in the country and 20 per cent of these account for 80 per cent of exports, the remaining ones being small units".

All such processing and freezing units may not own export licences. So those firms which possess export licences buy the frozen materials.

The processing and freezing of shrimp vary with consumer and market preferences as well as with the variety of shrimp:

- a. Headless with shell on—only the heads are removed while the shell is kept intact. Grades indicate the number of pieces per kilogram/pound (8-12,11-15,16-20,21-25,26-30,31-35,36-40,41-50,51-60,61-70,71-90,91-110). They are packed in two kg duplex cartons containing polythene sheets. Ten such cartons make one master case of 20 kgs.
- a. Peeled and un-deveined (PUD)—small varieties are converted into PUD. Grades are 60-80,80-120,100-200,300-500, packed as earlier.
- c. Peeled and de-veined (PD)—small varieties to be exported to the US are mostly processed in this way. Grades are 130-200,200-300,300-500. They are packed in five lb cartons and 10 such cartons make one master case of 50 lbs.
- d. Cooked and peeled shrimp—exported to Australia. But this is not a major market.



- e. Individually quick frozen (IQF)—these products fetch a better price in foreign markets than conventional block frozen materials. To produce IQF products, high quality raw materials should be used and the processing done under strict hygienic conditions. The products should be packed in attractive moisture-proof packaging and stored at or below 23 °C, without fluctuation in storage temperature. Thermofoam mould trays have now become accepted packing containers for IQF products in developed countries.

The different IQF products exported from India are:

**Shrimp-whole**

peeled and de-veined  
cooked  
headless - shell on  
butterfly fan tail

**lobster**

cooked lobsters  
lobster tails  
lobster meat

**cuttlefish**

fillets

**clams**

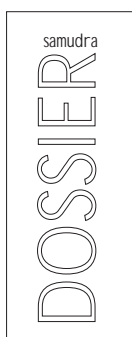
boiled clam meat

**fish fillets**


skinless fillets of white lean fish

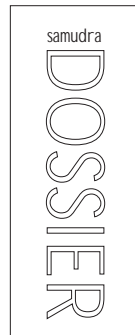
The main advantage of IQF products is that they greatly facilitate retail trade by making available small and attractive consumer packs. Unlike block frozen products, they do not take much time to be thawed.

The disadvantages are that (i) they do not have the compact nature of block frozen products and hence occupy more space; (ii) IQF products are more prone to dehydration because of their large exposed surfaces, and (iii) small fluctuations in storage temperature can result in thawing and re-freezing of the product into a large lump thereby destroying the original characteristic of IQF.



According to MPEDA, "India exports about 77,000 tonnes of shrimp in processed form, 85 per cent of which goes in bulk packs and only 15 per cent in IQF value-added packs. MPEDA has promoted nearly 60 IQF units with a capacity of 250 tonnes per day. Out of India's total shrimp exports of Rs. 663.33 crores, about 15 per cent was accounted for by IQF shrimp".

Japan retains the position as the single largest buyer of Indian shrimp (54 per cent), followed by West Europe (25 per cent) and the US (12 per cent). Export of canned shrimp has not picked up due to the high cost of the cans. 



**Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1**

Condition of the Workers

**1. Migrant women workers in the fish processing factories**

In the past, the role of women in fisheries was restricted to post-harvest operations like salting, drying and marketing. Although some of their processing techniques were quite sophisticated, it was all locally done and the process remained within the control of the women. The advent of ice, about three decades ago, brought about a total transformation. Fish could be kept fresh for longer periods of time and transported farther. In the 1960s, export of fish, mainly shrimp, even transformed the entire organization of the market and work conditions.

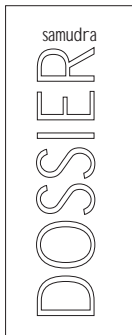
Women are employed in large numbers in these processing factories. The fragile fish needs delicate handling and it is this nature of work that necessitated the services of women.

Social stereotypes about the sexual division of labour definitely influence the employers. Women are considered to have 'natural' capacities and personality traits which make them suited to time-consuming and repetitive work. Women can also be paid lower wages than men, since it is assumed that women's work is always supplementary and never the primary source of income for the household.

For various reasons, most of these women are migrant labour from Kerala. It is said that they possess special skills for peeling and grading. They are also believed to be neater and more literate than their counterparts from other States.

The following States employ migrant labour from Kerala:

1. Karnataka—Manglore (Ullal), Malpe
2. Goa
3. Maharashtra—Malwan Ratnagiri, Bombay(Thane, Colaba)
4. Gujarat—Veravel, Porbander
5. West Bengal—Calcutta
6. Orissa—Manjeswar, Bhubaneswar
7. Andhra Pradesh—Visakhapatnam, Kakinada
8. Tamil Nadu—Madras, Tuticorin, Mandapam



Over the years, there have been reports of ill treatment of these migrant women workers in the factories by the contractors. The issue has even been discussed in the Kerala State Legislature but it has proved difficult for anyone to make inroads into an analysis of this sector. The National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), through its member unions in some of these States, decided that they would take up the issue if sufficient data and contacts could be provided.

The Women in Fisheries programme of ICSF decided to look into the issue. Gender relations and the sexual division of labour (women's reproductive role and the social and ideological aspects of family organization) seem to be the factors which limit women's participation to this kind of work.

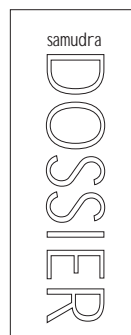
This initial report is based on discussions with women who have returned to Kerala in recent months for various reasons and is also based on visits to factories at Mangalore, Malpe, Veravel and Porbander, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

### **Background of the women workers**

Most (60 per cent) of the migrant processing workers are young girls between 16 and 25 years of age. Some are even between 12 and 14 years. Roughly 20 to 30 per cent are married women, some divorced or separated. Older women are found working as cooks, in the mess run by the girls themselves or by the contractors/agents.

Most of the workers are educated, some have even completed their Secondary School Leaving Certificate or the Pre-Degree Certificate. It is the extreme poverty in their families that forces them to migrate to other States in search of work. Some girls were of the opinion that even if they got work in their own place for the same wage, they would prefer to work outside their home districts, as this was the only way to save money. If they were to work in their own localities, they would be forced to spend the weekly wages on the consumption needs of the family. Most of the girls save money by joining *chit* funds (a traditional informal system of savings which functions outside the banking network) so that they can buy some gold or other assets of their own or to marry off their sisters.

However, contrary to initial impressions, not all the girls are from coastal areas or fishing communities. Many come from interior villages of Kerala, like Erumely, Chenganoor,



Thiruvalla, Kundara, Kayamkulam and Mavelikara. In one factory, we found that all the girls in the peeling section were from Punaloor. Of the coastal areas, Vypeen, Malippuram, Chellanam of Ernakulam District, Alleppey and Quilon and Trivandrum Districts are the areas from where most workers come.

### **Recruiting**

The contractors or recruiting agents go to the field and recruit girls, promising them good wages, free accommodation and food. Some of these agents have earlier been workers themselves. Some are women who also work as supervisors in the factories. They are responsible for the welfare of the girls whom they recruit. Each factory may have three or four such recruiting workers. Once a couple of girls from a village start going for this kind of work, word spreads and more girls follow from the same area. Padappakara, a small village near Kundara, has 165 girls working in fish processing factories outside the State.

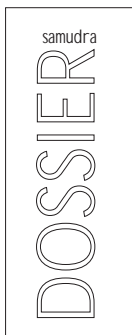
Young boys also migrate to do loading and unloading work in stores, but their numbers are small compared to the women. Many of these girls have worked for 10 to 12 years. Only a few have returned to the same factory in successive years. Many change locations each year, hoping for better wages and working conditions. There is thus a high labour turnover in each factory.

Neither the Government of Kerala nor any agency has an idea of the total number of migrant women workers working in fish processing and allied occupations. Even MPEDA literature does not reveal the exact number of factories or the condition of the workers involved in bringing 'valuable foreign exchange' to the country.

### **Contractors**

The contractors or agents are responsible for

- bringing the women from Kerala and taking them back after their contract period is over;
- arranging accommodation, food and medical expenses; and



- payment of salary, bonus and overtime wages. (In certain factories the management makes payment directly.)

There are two types of contractor systems: the labour contract and the work contract. Labour contractors are employed by the factory to organize the workers and manage them. They are paid a monthly salary from the factory plus Rs 50 for each girl they bring to work.

Work contractors are those who undertake to process a particular quantity of shrimp in a season for a fixed amount. All work like organizing the workers and making their payment is taken care of by them. The management deals only with the contractor.

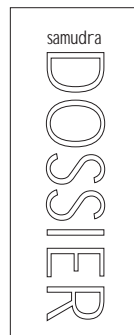
### **Terms and conditions of employment**

Most of the factories in Veravel and Porbander in Gujarat claim to have eliminated contractors; the girls are recruited by agents and their term of work is for 11 months. If they work 10 months, they are paid the 11th month's salary along with their leave. Their travel expenses are met by the company. Medical expenses are also paid by some companies, while others pay the girls just Rs 30 a month to buy medicines. The contract system exists in other States like Maharashtra and West Bengal.

### **The work process**

The main tasks in a factory are washing fish, peeling, gutting, grading, packing, freezing and loading in stores (ice rooms). Cleaning of the factory premises, and carrying fish and ice to the factory are mostly done by local workers. The workers in the peeling section get wages according to the work done (piece-rate). They have to squat on the floor and peel the shrimp. Cleaning one basin of five kg fetches Rs 2.50 to Rs 3. If the girls are experienced and skilled, they can peel 20 to 25 basins (100 kg) a day. The work is very hard. Shrimps are not always peeled. They are sometimes beheaded and then beautifully packed and frozen.

The workers in the grading and packing sections receive a monthly salary which varies from Rs 650 to Rs 950. They have to use this to pay for their food and other necessities. A yearly increment of Rs 50 is paid, based on the worker's experience and also depending on the goodwill of the supervisors. The girls are able to save Rs 300 to Rs 500 a month. Overtime is paid in some factories at Rs 3 an hour.



The arrival of fish in the factory depends on the season. Certain months are off-season and the girls are then sent home. When bulk fish catches arrive, the girls have to work at night and for long hours. This means that the workers have to stay in the factory and remain at the call of the management. This is also one reason why the owners prefer girls from other areas to reside at the factory premises.

The usual working time is from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., with a half-hour break for tea and a one-hour lunch break. This means that the girls work 12 hours a day, often in the same position (squatting or standing) and handling cold fish in water. Men who work in the freezing room and handle ice have gumboots. Women are provided with rubber gloves, plastic or cotton aprons and a cap. Since the gloves slow the pace of work, girls often do not wear them. Handling products under these conditions causes swelling of the hands as well as other related diseases like rheumatism and spinal problems. The whole process is hard for young girls and many return home unable to adjust to such working conditions.

### **Accommodation and social life**

The most disheartening factor is the lack of a social life and a congenial atmosphere in the living milieu. The girls' workplace and living quarters are in the same premises, where fish, ice and water are handled all the time, and vehicles come and go. Some of the quarters are on the first floor of the factory building. Others are nearby. Only at a few places are the quarters in separate premises. Only occasionally do the girls go out shopping or to see the doctor. The rest of the time they have to remain within the factory premises, irrespective of whether there is work or not.

The accommodation facilities are very minimal. Large rooms accommodate 30 to 40 girls. They dress, eat, keep their belongings, sleep and rest and sometimes even do their private cooking on a kerosene stove, all in the same place. There is no separate dressing room, dining room or recreation facilities. The toilets and bathing facilities are inadequate, considering the number of inmates.

The girls form groups (depending on the area they come from or on the basis of the contractor who recruited them) and run their own mess. So, in the same premises, there could be two, three or even more kitchens. The menu is basically rice thrice



daily, with one vegetable curry. Besides that, one and a half kg of sugar and 250 gm of oil (for grooming hair) are supplied. Girls share the costs, which come to about Rs 200 to Rs 250 per month. If they want anything additional like tea or the occasional fish curry, they have to bear the extra cost themselves.

The drainage and waste disposal facilities in these quarters are also poor. Mosquitoes are a big menace. In Veravel, the shortage of pure water is also a major problem. Tankers bring drinking water. Contaminated water cause diseases like jaundice and typhoid. Most of the factories do not have a company doctor or medical facilities, so the workers go to private doctors nearby. Some companies, however, meet all medical expenses.

The only recreation is an occasional cinema or a video or the TV. Malayalam weeklies like Mangalam and Malayala Manorama are popular. No newspapers are available.

In most factories, the girls are allowed to go out for religious services only on important occasions or festivals. Only at Veravel is there a regular Sunday mass and some factories allow Christian girls to attend it.

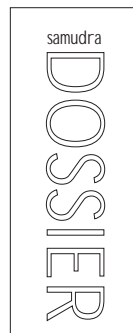
In Veravel there are about 20 factories, of which 14 are functioning well. All these factories together employ about 5,000 girls from Kerala, besides the local workers and men from Kerala. At Porbander, there are three factories employing about 1,500 girls.

## 2. Factory visits

*H.M.G.*

This factory is owned by K. P. Thomas from Kerala. He is the President of the Exporters Association. His factory employs about 150 girls in peeling and 300 girls in grading and packing. The peeling workers stay at the factory premise and others stay in a hostel run by nuns. In this hostel too, accommodation facilities are just as in other places—overcrowded. The girls do not seem to take the responsibility to run the place well. The shared mess system is prevalent here.

This is the only factory where an eight-hour working time is followed. There are three shifts: 9 a.m. - 7 p.m., 2 p.m. - 12 p.m. and 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. The girls are transported by a company bus from the hostel to the factory. They get Rs 950 per month,



from which they pay Rs 200 to Rs 250 for the mess. The overtime rate is Rs 15 for two and a half hours.

There is a chapel in the same building where Christian girls from other factories also come for the Sunday mass. The girls here seem satisfied with their situation, at least about the fact that they have only eight hours of work. They do not have any recreation facilities, except a weekly video show.

### CHAM

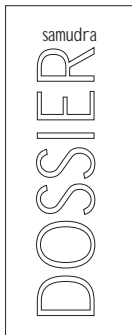
This is a large company which has branches in Porbander and Bombay. The Veravel CHAM employs about 400 girls and, at Porbander, about 1,000 girls. The main recruiting agents are Augustine Rozario from Kochuthope, Trivandrum who is now settled at Veravel and Gracy from Puthuvypin, Cochin.

At Veravel, we met about 54 girls from the Pulluvila-Puthiathura area of Trivandrum District. About 15 of them were from the girls' group organized by community workers of the Programme for Community Organization, and they were delighted to see us.

Accommodation is, as usual, overcrowded. Bathing rooms are insufficient. The girls work for 12 hours and receive a salary upwards of Rs 840. Those who have 10 years of experience receive Rs 1,050. No overtime is paid here but the girls get a 20 per cent bonus. Each month Rs 30 is paid as medical expenses.

Some of the older women seem more adjusted than the younger ones. An example is the case of Stella. Her husband deserted her and her child is in an orphanage. She seems to be happy as she can earn Rs 500 a month. Most of the girls prefer to invest the money in a *chit* fund or entrust it to the management and take the money only when they go home.

There have been incidents of women who, after working in certain factories for 12 years, have been dismissed so that they do not claim any other rights or benefits. These are now working at another factory. A labour contractor also met with a similar fate after servicing a company for 12 years. She was first at Veravel, then sent to Porbander and, in 1994, to Bombay. She says that she was asked to go home as she fought with the management for better treatment for the girls.



At CHAM, Porbander, we met Augustine Rozario and Gracy, the contractors. Rozario took us to the factory, which was very modern. It seems that this year girls from Colachel and Nagercoil in Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu have been recruited by Joseph, a man who had returned from the Middle East.

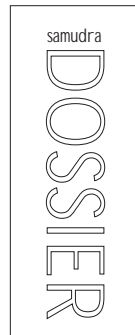
There are some girls from Pulluvila whom Augustine Rozario had taken on the promise that they would work as graders and would receive Rs 850 a month and free accommodation. But the girls ended up being employed in the packing section and receiving only Rs 750. They were very vociferous and fought with Rozario in our presence. He explained that since these girls were new, they were put in the packing section. If they improve, they would be posted in the grading section. A lot of hostility towards Augustine Rozario was probably due to his ways.

*Ravi-Ratna Exporters, Veravel*

Here too there were girls from Puthiathura in Trivandrum. Some of them were very close to the Kerala Independent Fishworkers Union. Augustine Jacob from Ernakulam is the personal manager of the factory. The girls here seem to be very happy compared to the other places, although working conditions are more or less the same.

In the beginning of March, a news item in Malayalam newspapers reported the case of a girl named Shoba who was coming home from a prawn factory in Gujarat, accompanied by her father. She reportedly attempted suicide by jumping out of a running train. Her father jumped after her and he died on the spot. The girl fell unconscious and later died in the hospital. We learned that she worked at a company called Castle Rock. The article mentioned a certain person, Gopalakrishna, and we sought an appointment with him at the factory.

Castle Rock is situated on the beach, far from other factories and rather isolated. Accommodation facilities are very poor and sanitation and drainage are bad. Gopalakrishna was willing to meet us and explained that the situation had improved in recent years. He said that the company hopes to make further improvements slowly. When asked about the 12-hour working time, he said in effect it is 10 hours only. He agreed that this is too much. He refuted allegations about harassment and said that they do not know why Shoba jumped out of the



train. The management ascribed it to some past relationship of hers and not to anything which had happened in the factory. Gopalakrishna was angry at the negative role played by the media in highlighting isolated incidents. He seemed to feel that with such large numbers of teenage girls working away from home, certain problems are inevitable.

### *Maharashtra*

One factory at Bombay and one at Retnagiri were visited. In Maharashtra, too, the situation is not different. The contract system is followed here.

At Retnagiri, which is about 350 km south of Bombay, there are seven processing factories. A co-operative also owns a factory. All these factories together employ about 800 girls.

### *West Bengal*

The one factory visited at Calcutta revealed the worst situation in terms of accommodation, living and working conditions. When factories are isolated or scattered, nobody seems to pay any attention and the girls are at the mercy of the contractors.

### *Karnataka*

Factories at Ullal and Malpe were visited. The factory at Ullal employs about 300 girls. After accounting for food expenses, they are able to save about Rs 600 each month. Conditions are not much different. The factory at Malpe is a subsidiary unit of a company which has other units in Kerala and Goa. Only 40 girls are employed here. The company subsidizes their food expenses, so they are able to save Rs 700 a month.

### *Andhra Pradesh*

Although Andhra Pradesh is one of the biggest shrimp-landing States at present, with the largest number of processing plants, we have not made a detailed study of the conditions of women in the plants in this State. We know that the Institute of Labour is at present processing a detailed study of this nature and we await the results. Nevertheless, we did have an opportunity to visit one processing plant in Vishakapatnam, belonging to the George Meijo group. The firm, which started with the putting-out system in Kerala, has now a highly integrated business enterprise. Although the firm still buys shrimp from individual agents, moving from one landing area to another, it has now directly entered aquaculture to ensure constant supplies.

The George Majio plant is probably one of the better managed plants in the country. It employs about 100 girls from Kerala, all of whom have a written work contract and who have work all the year round. They live at the plant site, which is surrounded by a big garden, where they can freely move about during their leisure time. Fifteen to 20 girls live in one room, sharing the bare necessities. They cook their own food in groups in a common kitchen. When there is work, they put in long hours. But they did not seem to complain. They earn a minimum of Rs 1,000 a month, after the training period of six months, during which they are paid Rs 600.

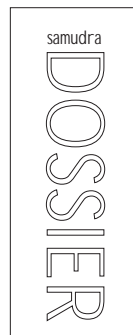
As the plant is well organized and well maintained, the working conditions for the girls are also good. All the same, the young girls are confined to the four walls of the factory, which is at some distance from the town. They go out mainly to attend the Sunday mass, when they also do some shopping. Their recreation is watching the TV at the factory site itself.

### 3. Labour legislation

The Factory Act and the Inter-State Migrant Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act of 1979 are applicable to these workers.

According to the Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, establishments which employ such workers should be registered with the Labour Department of each State. The contractors also have to get a licence to take workers to other States. Such licences must contain the terms and conditions of the agreement under which the workers are recruited, the remuneration payable, hours of work, fixation of wages and other essential amenities they are entitled to. The licensing officer has the authority to suspend or cancel the licence if the contractor has failed to comply with the conditions subject to which the licence has been granted. The contractors also are supposed to issue a passbook to each worker, affixed with their photographs, and also indicate, in the language of the worker, the following:

- name and place of establishment where the worker is employed
- period of employment



- proposed rates and modes of payment of wages
- displacement allowance payable
- return fee payable to the worker on the expiry of the employment period and in other contingencies
- deductions made
- other particulars, as may be prescribed

The wages, welfare measures and other facilities to be provided are also laid down in the Act. The Minimum Wages Act is applicable to these workers too.

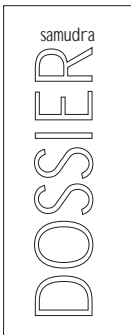
But our discussions have shown that these laws are not strictly adhered to. Company owners are always in a position to negotiate with the licensing officers and inspecting authorities. Women workers have reported several instances of how the management is in league with these authorities. In one factory, just before the time of inspection, all the girls below a certain height are hidden in a room until the inspectors leave. The inspectors can be easily bribed too.

The marine export industry is acknowledged for contributing significantly to India's foreign trade and foreign exchange earnings. India is expected to reach a target of Rs 1,500 crores at the end of the 8th Five Year Plan period. The government intends to promote marine products on a priority basis for a major expansion of exports in the coming years.

### Suggestions

The condition of women migrant processing workers deserves urgent attention. They are not able to organize themselves and do anything at the workplace, as they are at the mercy of contractors or agents who recruit them from Kerala. Their situation is precarious as they do not know the language of the States they migrate to. Hence they can not even communicate with the inspecting authorities.

An important suggestion which came up from many quarters is to form an organization of these girls in Kerala. Such an organization could slowly replace recruiting agents and direct-



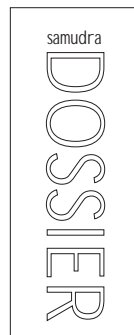
ly liaise with companies and demand a better deal for the workers.

The Government of Kerala should be approached to ensure strict implementation of the Contract Labour Act and the Migrant Labour Act. This will mean that all the contractors who take labour out of the State should register themselves with the Labour Department of the State. They will have to provide identity cards as well as contract agreements to each girl, wherein the terms and conditions of the contract are clearly stated.

The minimum demands of the workers are the following:

- implementation of minimum wages, overtime allowance, medical benefits and displacement allowance
- ensure an eight-hour work day
- provide and maintain suitable residential accommodation with basic facilities like drinking water, mess facilities, drainage, etc.
- provide compensation to the families in case of fatal accidents or serious physical injury

These issues should be brought to the attention of the National Commission of Women, the Labour Commission of the Government of India and the fishworkers organizations of the respective States, so that pressure be exerted on the management of the factories to improve matters.



## Document II

### Oral Testimonies of Women Workers

#### Sinija

My name is Sinija. I am unmarried and 17 years old. In my family, I have my father, mother, grandmother, two elder brothers and an older sister. I have studied up to Standard Eight. My father does fishing and other fish-related activities. My mother used to make nets, but now she is engaged in making coir. My grandmother helps my mother in her job. My brothers are fishermen and my sister does tailoring work.

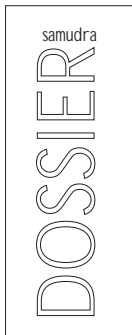
My sister and I worked in Ratna Seafoods, Retnagiri for two years. After that, my sister turned to tailoring. I went for grading work in a company named Rahul Seafoods in Goa. I am here to share my experiences in that company.

I went to Goa in the month of July 1994. I worked there till 13 March 1995. Even though my contract lasted until May 1995, I was forced to return earlier. My brother took me back home, meeting the expenses himself. I will describe the situation I was in.

A contractor took me along with seven girls to Goa for grading work. We were promised Rs 900 per month as salary and an overtime wage of Rs 4 per hour. The working time was to be from 9 a.m to 9 p.m. The overtime wage was for the work after 9 p.m.

There were more than a hundred girls working in that company when I joined. Our accommodation facilities were very limited. Thirty of us had to stay in a room; a small portion of the room was used as the bathroom. We had only three or four buckets. Three or four of us had to bathe together to enable us to reach the company on time, even if we got up at 5 a.m. There were only four latrines for more than 100 girls staying in that building. We had to walk half an hour from where we stayed to reach the company.

No leave was permitted us other than four days off in a month, even if there were five Sundays. We were warned that salary would be cut for absenting ourselves. We had to do overtime after 9 p.m. on almost all days. It was compulsory. We were compelled to stay back even if we were tired.





We used to get kanji (rice gruel) for our breakfast before going to the company. We had a half-hour interval for tea at 10.30 a.m. There was no specific time for lunch and we would often have to work until 3 p.m if work had to be finished. Since we had to walk from the company to where we stayed for lunch and then back, we hardly got any time to rest. Tea was served in the company at 5.30 p.m. We normally reached our boarding place only around midnight when we would eat our supper.

I worked for eight months in that company according to this schedule. But I did not get even a single paise as salary. Even though the first month's salary was given to us, the contractor took it back promising to return it after some days. Whenever we asked for the salary, the contractor told us that the owner had not paid him. Not only were we denied the salary but the contractor also took away the gold ornaments of some of the girls. I wrote about this desperate situation to my parents, and they sent my brother to fetch me back.

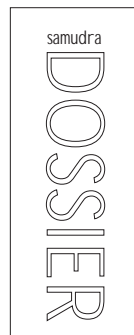
### **Shobna**

My name is Shobna. I am from Padappakara, a small village in Quilon. I am 20 years old. I am the second of the five daughters of my parents. My mother is alive, but my father is no more. Two of my sisters are also working in a prawn factory but one recently came back because of illness.

When I was 14 years old, I started working in a processing company in Bombay. From 1988, I started going to Gujarat to work in a company called Castle Rock.

The contractor is a woman from my own village. She promised us Rs 1,200 as monthly wages and Rs 50 as medical allowances, provident fund etc. We were also promised a day off a week.

But now we find that even if medical expenses come to Rs 2,000, we get only Rs 200 or Rs 300. The working time is from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., with a half-hour tea break in the morning and evening, and one-hour lunch break. For all three meals, we get rice gruel. We are forced to work overtime even if we do not desire it. The overtime allowances are Rs 3.50 per hour. But when we do five hours overtime, we get paid for only two hours. If we resist or protest, we are punished in various ways, like not marking attendance when we sign in to work in the morning, not giving us overtime when we want it, etc.



There is no service consideration or benefit. Those who just joined as well as those who have worked for ten years, all receive the same wages.

After twelve hours of continuous work, if we refuse to do overtime, we are even physically assaulted. Sometimes the men come to take us to work by force, beating us with chap-pals. Often we are refused permission to go to the toilet during work. Earlier we had identity cards but this has not been given now for the last two years.

We suffer other tensions too. The telegram conveying the message of my father's death was not given to me. Even two days after I came to know of it, I was not sent home. On the contrary, when our supervisor's father died, she went home by air.

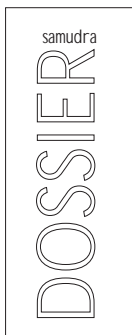
Living facilities are extremely poor. Thirty or forty of us stay in a shed which leaks when it rains heavily. There are only three toilets and bathrooms for 250 persons. Only if three or four of us bathe together can we get to the factory on time. We have to keep our belongings and clothes in our room. Clean water is rarely available. I frequently change companies in the hope of getting better wages and work conditions.

Working in the cold and wet rooms and lack of pure drinking water causes all kinds of contagious diseases. My 14-year old sister was infected with malaria and is almost paralysed. She is under treatment now but the company is not giving any medical help.

We are exploited in other ways too. Our shared mess bill in the beginning of the year worked out to be only Rs 210. Yet they charged us Rs 350. The contractor keeps us in her clutches. She won't let us go shopping on the pretext that we will go astray. Then she sells us goods at twice the market price.

The story can go on but I'll stop here.

After working for fourteen years, all I have been able to save is four sovereigns of gold ( worth around Rs 15,000).



### **Leelamma**

My name is Leelamma. I have my parents, brothers and sisters. I worked in Liberty Company, Andhra for two years. The main

problem we faced was of water and accommodation. Thirty five of us had to live in a small room. The promised salary was given but during working hours, we were not allowed to go to the toilet.

Then I worked in another company. Here we were accommodated in a hall and each of us had a cot and mat. The work was for 12 hours, with no overtime. One of the girls got chicken pox. There was no place to isolate her, so all the 24 in her room got chicken pox too. The contractor did not give any money for treatment or compensate the wages we lost.

### **Vibha**

I am 17 years old. I have completed my high school, but could not continue studies because my family is poor.

I work in a company in Andhra. Here the main problem is lack of pure drinking water. So we can't get our cooking and other work done on time, nor get to the factory on time.

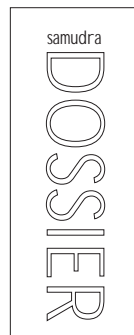
Living conditions are also poor. Thirty or thirty-five of us live in one room. We have to come back to our quarters at night for dinner. This takes time. So we have little rest.

We were taken to do grading work but are now asked to do all work including peeling. If unwell, we need a pass to go and see the doctor, but they don't always give this to us. They also often refuse permission to drink water or go to the toilet during working hours.

### **Sahaya Rani**

I come from Mel Midalam (a village in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu). I am 20 years old. I work at the Liberty Company plant in Vishakapatnam. We get prawns from the nearby prawn farms owned by the company. Four months ago, the prawns were affected by a disease and there was no stock for us to work on. So we were asked to go home until the stock starts coming in again.

Four girls from Mel Midalam work for the Liberty Company in Vizag, but at different plants. We heard of the work through Eugene, the agent/contractor, who is from Karangal, the nearest biggish town. I don't know whether he is originally from our community, but he has a lot of friends here. So he asked his friends to find him a certain number of girls, and his



friends brought him to our houses. Since these people are known to us, we were allowed to go. Also, one of the supervisors at my plant, Chellathurai, is from our village and so we had heard of the work through him. The manager of the plant, Abu Baker, is also from this district.

We work 12-hour shifts—either the day shift from 9 a.m to 9 p.m or the night shift from 9 p.m to 9 a.m. We get paid overtime at Rs 5 per hour if we work longer. Many of the girls refuse, as they are tired, but I usually take it up, as it is a good way of making more money. We get one day off per week, but the day is not fixed and varies depending on the stock.

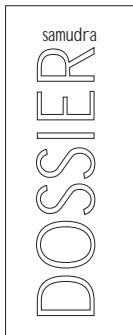
I do packing work and get paid a monthly wage of Rs 1,000. I started with Rs 900, then they increased it. Of this, Rs 300 goes towards mess fees. The manager keeps our money and gives us whatever we need for our expenses. The balance is given when we come home for leave once a year. I usually bring back Rs 4,000 to Rs 6,000 in a year. If someone leaves before the year is up, her balance may not be paid to her. This seems to depend on whether the manager likes you or not.

We live about a 15-minute bus ride from the plant. The boys and girls have separate rooms in the same building and there is a watchman to guard the building. The kitchen is near our bedroom. We eat *kanji* at 8 a.m, take lunch with us and eat dinner when we return at 9.30 p.m. or so. We are given tea at the plant at 11 a.m and 4 p.m.

Sometimes—once a month perhaps—there is an ammonia leak. Some girls have fainted before they could leave the room. They were taken to the hospital in the company jeep.

Before this, I worked in Mangalapuri in Karnataka, in Malpe and in Tuticorin. In Mangalapuri, I did peeling work. We were paid according to how much we had done at Rs 1.50 per bucket. An experienced worker can do a bucket in one hour. Less experienced workers can spend two to three hours on a bucket.

Peeling work is very hard. At first, one's hands blister and bleed and it is very painful to continue. But we are not allowed to stop, and if we do, we lose money. We are allowed to apply ointment on our hands and rest only at the end of the day.



If 50 girls are taken to do peeling work, at least 25 leave immediately, as they can not stand the work. But I would think of the hardship in my family and continue. Later, I too left the place because I got a better offer elsewhere. I took my younger sister there. She also sticks it out though other girls who went with her from this village left. I heard that they didn't work for even 10 days because their hands were bleeding. And perhaps they also went on strike, so they were told to leave. The girls refuse to talk, so I won't know what happened till my sister comes back.

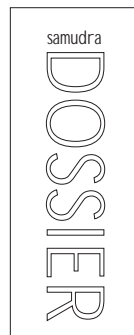
At Mangalapuri, the wages are held by the manager till you go home for leave at the end of one year. If you leave before the year is up, you don't get paid for any part of it. There is no union for migrant workers, but the local girls, who have family support, have a union.

In the train, on our way to the plant from here, we sometimes encounter harassment from the police who are immediately suspicious when they see one man escorting a number of young girls. Since we don't want to tell them we are going for work, they get even more suspicious. This has not happened to me, but to other girls from our village.

I continue despite all these difficulties because we are poor. My father is often ill and can't go to sea. On other days, the catch is poor. For the last two weeks, we have had no fish at all because of the rough seas. My mother carries fish to the market to sell but does not earn much. With the money I earned, I was able to make two gold chains for my sister for her wedding. I also sent money for my father's medical treatment when I heard he was in hospital. My father does not want me to go back but I am going to. The work gives me a bit of economic independence and now that I am experienced at it, I don't mind it. You have to put up with people's gossip if you're just hanging about the house, and time doesn't go by here like it does if there's a lively bunch of young girls working together in the plant.

### **Shantha P. Nair**

My name is Shantha P. Nair. They call me 'Shantha Chechi'. I am 51 years old and have studied up to the Secondary School Leaving Certificate, but did not write the exams. I am married and my husband died 31 years ago. I have one 30-year old daughter, who is married and has two children.



I am a traditional manual labourer. Since no other work was available and since there was no other means of livelihood, I went in for prawn peeling. I have worked at this job for 18 years now. I was on the staff of two companies in Aroor (Kerala) and started peeling work three years ago. Working hours in the prawn peeling yards are, depending on the availability of prawns, from 7 a.m. in the morning to 6 p.m. in the evening. When there is full work, I can earn up to Rs 60 a day. They pay rate now is Rs 4 for two-and-a-half kg of peeled prawns. There are hardly any special work-related benefits. There is an extra-coupon system or a bonus-coupon system, which may add up to Rs 500 per year. This is paid for during festival times, and comes in very handy. For the peeling, work is done sitting, for which there is a facility in the shed. The behaviour of management is now rather good.

There is no conscious preference for working in Kerala. I work in Kerala because all my relations and links are in Kerala. If I go out of Kerala for work, there will be no one to help my family at home.

We have several problems. One problem is the impermanence of work. We are never on a roster of permanent employees. The problem is the irregularity of the work. We get work only when raw prawns are available for hand peeling. Otherwise we are unemployed, and with no work-related benefits, or any kind of health insurance.

Another problem is that many women develop work-related body aches and various kinds of skin problems. Work with iced prawns is done without any gloves and this leads to many varieties of ailments on the fingers and palms. Also, the work is done sitting in a squatting position. This too leads to long-term health problems.

Another problem is that the peeling shed women are not at all organised in any formal way. We do not dare to organize ourselves, fearing that we will immediately lose our jobs and our livelihood. Thousands of unemployed women are waiting to take up our work, if we are thrown out by the management. Because of this situation, we are not able to deal with our related problems, except in rather informal ways. Once we went on an instant strike for a wage increase. But after we went on strike, we went through great insecurity about our jobs for a number of days. After some delicate negotiations, assisted by

Sr. Alice on our side, we got a 25 paise increase in our piece rate per kg of prawns peeled. This was a bit of a victory for the women in all the peeling sheds around. But we have not dared to get organised into a full-blooded trade union. We do not find it quite practical.

However, we have formed an informal committee of seven women in our peeling shed. Whenever we have problems, this committee, helped by Sr. Alice, negotiates with the management and settles issues on the basis of some consensus. This has worked with reasonable success so far.

### **Sheela James**

I come from a village called Padappakara near Kundara in Kollam district. A lady contractor from my own area takes girls to work in the factory. She is 40 years old. She promised Rs 1,200 a month and one month's free salary. But what we actually got was Rs 1,013. There were deductions like writing fee, tax, etc. If we get sick and can not go to work, Rs 35 will be deducted. Although there are four days off in a month, it was compulsory to work when there are prawns. When there is a problem, they call us names.

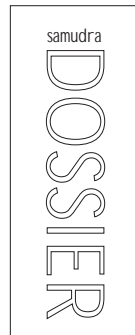
We were not allowed to meet the owners. The contractors deal with all matters. Sometimes if there are lots of prawns and we can not go to work because of sickness, then they harass us in all sorts of ways, and even call in the men to beat us with chappals.

Once I slipped and fell down. My hand was broken. The contractor said the management would meet the expenses. I had to spend Rs 2000, besides the travel expenses. But I was given only a quarter of the amount.

Another time, a rod pierced my leg and it got infected. I had to spend Rs 1,500, but got only Rs 350.

When two friends' parents got sick, they were not allowed to go home.

The contractor owed Rs 18,000 to some shop for provisions bought the previous year—not for us. She charged an additional amount to the usual Rs 360 per month to pay this back.



Please help us to form an organization. There is nobody to help us. Two girls from my village, aged 13 and 16, who worked in the factories are now at home, paralysed. The contractor made all the profit but these girls did not get any help.

When they take us to work, we travel unreserved in trains. We are very often harassed by the police. The contractor tells us to tell everyone that we are going on a study tour or a picnic to Somnath temple near Veravel in Gujarat, or to an island near Porbander. So we tell all these lies. This harassment occurs at different places and it is frightening. They can throw us out.

We were forced to do overtime and then they won't pay us correctly. Once my overtime allowance came to Rs 480 and what I got was Rs 25. This happens often. It is by exploiting us in so many ways that they make money.

We want an organization. If we die there, at least our dead body should be brought back to our parents.

### Questions of the Jury

Q1: What exactly was the manner and procedure of recruitment? Is the contractor somebody known to the witness? How did the witness come in contact with them? (This is important to establish means to curb their operations.)

A: Either the contractor was from the same village or had friends in the village, or other girls from the village had been recruited by this contractor earlier.

Q2: Would it be correct to say that all the women have been recruited through a contractor, or have some gone directly? Is it generally true that all the women working in a plant are from a particular village?

A: Everybody goes through contractors. All those in a plant may not be from the same village.

Q3: When the girls return home after eight to 10 months, do they have any outstanding debts to their name? (This was asked because a few of the girls mentioned that advances had been paid to their parents when they were recruited.)



A: Any outstanding loan has to be cleared before the worker returns home.

Q4: Some of the girls said that their wages are held by the contractor as a lump sum, and if they leave for whatever reason before their contracted year is up, they do not get the money. Is that money then lost to them forever or do they recover it eventually? How frequent is this occurrence?

A: Most do not get it back unless the manager has a soft spot for them. When Sinika's brother came to bring her back, she lost eight months wages.

Q5: Do these girls know who their actual or ultimate employer is?

A: In general, they do not know. A few may have seen him, but all their dealings are with the contractor and/or manager.

Q6: Does the principal employer have any role in the payment of wages and supervision of working conditions? Does he ever check whether wages have been paid or not?

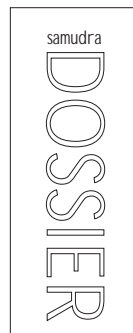
A: The principal employer does not know whether the wage has been paid or not. The production manager may himself not be known to the owner as he too may have been employed through a contractor.

Q7: Have any labour inspectors visited the factory at any time?

A: In many cases, the workers are asked to clean the factory when an inspector is due and then go to their living quarters. The contractors keep three wage registers—one which they show to the principal employer, one to show the inspector, and one on which the girls sign in pencil.

Q8: Are there any unions or efforts to organise them?

A: There is no union, and few efforts are made because of fear of reprisals.



Q9: Shanta Nair said that through their struggle they got their wage raised from Rs 1 to Rs 2. What was the process by which that was achieved?

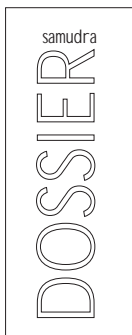
A: The strike started when the owners started giving the women more than the usual amount of prawns to peel. So the women left the prawns and struck work for five days. The prawns began to spoil. Shanta tried to negotiate with the owner who was a young boy and towards whom she felt quite maternal, but without much success. They approached various political parties for help and also approached Sr. Alice. She helped them to form a committee of five women of which Shanta is the president. It was not easy for them to come together since they are all from different religions. The owner did not try to stop them from organizing.

Q10: Had the workers ever tried to implement any rights that they thought were due to them or negotiated for these with the owners or contractors?

A: Shobha said that they had asked for higher wages, overtime pay, medical allowance, provident fund, but had not got any of these so far. Before coming away, they gave a written petition to the contractor demanding provident fund, but he tore it up. Another woman said that they had not asked out of fear.

Q11: Do they give up the job when they get married ?

A: Many continue to work after marriage. The management also has no objections.



## Document III

### Personal Responses from the Members of the Jury

#### Justice Krishna Iyer

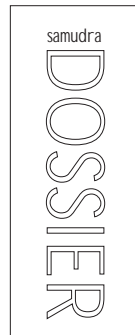
Sisters and brothers, we have gathered here in response to a summons, a summons to the nation. That summons was converted into a song, the welcome song, asking us to listen to the demands of the people and safeguard our vast fisheries wealth for the people of India.

We have heard the stories of trauma, of misery, of girls between 15 and 25. Imagine anyone's daughter or sister being required to leave home because of poverty, taken by a contractor from a small village in Tamil Nadu or Kerala to Goa. Processing the shrimp is a difficult job, involving a series of steps under freezing conditions. They have to work for 12 hours a day in numbing conditions because their family conditions are so bad. This is the misfortune that's driving them, the situation that contractors exploit. Ammonia leaks, long hours of work, confinement and overcrowding in small rooms, few latrines, having to get up very early. I shudder to think of it.

If you have tears to shed, shed them now. If you have fight, fight now. Organise, ask the government of Kerala to maintain a register of migrants, their conditions of work, their remuneration, how they can be brought back from slavery. The girls often get immune to it—this is a benumbing of the soul. This is a pain to us. So evidence like this is a catalyst, it helps us to understand what others like them suffer.

We need new legislation beyond the Factories Act. The government must be pressured and the girls' rights asserted in court. Our constitutional right to life includes the right to a comfortable, dignified life—its meaning should be expanded to include all of this. This hall is hallowed because here fishworkers of India have realised they have to fight.

We need records of the girls' work, registration of the plants they work in and welfare legislation. A tripartite body with representatives of the government, the women workers and the factory owners should be set up to monitor implementation of the regulatory acts and arbitrate. We have to force the government to ensure proper conditions for these girls to work



in and enable them to live in self-respect, safety and independence. We should oppose the export of prawns from our seas. Instead they should be used for our people's health and nutrition. This has already been done in Chilika Lake, where people have protested against the prawn farms created for raising prawn dollars.

### **Advocate Indira Jaisingh**

One suggestion I personally make is that we force the state of Kerala to take a more positive role in protecting its citizens. Let me cite my experience in the Bhopal case. The government of India passed a law enabling it to represent on behalf of the victims—the *parens patriae* doctrine passed by the Supreme Court. Every state has the right to ensure that its citizens are protected. So the state of Kerala has a duty to take up the issue with other states and say that it intends to take action to ensure that the interests of its citizens are protected.

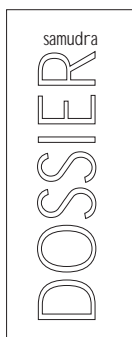
### **Advocate Janakiamma**

Without going into all the constitutional provisions, international codes etc., we could have avoided the exploitation of these women if we had observed the Factories Act, the Minimum Wages Act. I am told that the minimum wage for this work is Rs 1,600 per month. Under the Inter-state Migrant Workers Act, contractors have to provide details of those recruited, conditions of recruitment, etc. Contractors are supposed to pay the workers in the presence of the owners. Both are liable under the Factories Act. Conditions of accommodation too are regulated by this Act. So, as far as this case is concerned, we have adequate legislation and do not need to invoke international codes and constitutional provisions. What we do need is enforcement of existing laws and strict penalties for those contractors and owners who contravene them.

I am happy for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. I learnt much that I did not know before.

### **Advocate Nandita Haskar**

Hearing these testimonies today, after having travelled here from Kohima, what strikes me is how expensive shrimps are and how cheap human lives are. As the price of shampoo, clothes etc. goes up, the price of human lives goes down. It is not an accident that dead fish are worth more than human life and that the women can still laugh despite the pain.

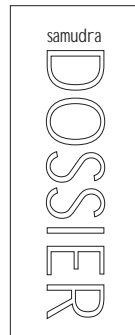


As a lawyer, I look at it legally, but it is not a question of implementation and non-implementation of labour laws. Rather, it is part of the process of globalization - the global production of clothes and fast food, and the global production of unemployment and human misery. This process the law can do little about. Our laws are among the best in the world—I was not being sarcastic when I said the Labour Officer was enthusiastic about implementing the laws, because the laws looked at in isolation justify such enthusiasm. But it is important not to give the girls false hope.

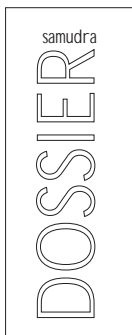
Now there are more and more public hearings—on dalits, women, etc.—and what is clear is that the law is not enough. What we need is to develop a new jurisprudence - a jurisprudence of insurgency. (These are not my words, such a jurisprudence is being developed by my counterparts in other countries). What compensation can be given to these women for their pain? If you die on a cycle, you get Rs 10,000. If you die in a plane crash, you get Rs 100,000. So the legal system itself is designed to discriminate against the poor. In the most famous Kerala case - that of Rajan - the argument was that he was studying to become an engineer and so compensation should be paid commensurate with that. But, if one of our sisters here was killed, since she was being paid less than minimum wages, compensation would be much less. It is these arguments we have to fight to form a new jurisprudence. We have to fight for this just as we fight for other rights.

We can also fight within our existing laws to make constitutional provisions meaningful. We know that government inspectors do not do their jobs. In Calcutta, Goa etc., it was outside individuals and groups who went and found out about the conditions the women worked in. So the NFF can ask that it be given the inspector's power so that it has the statutory power to go and inspect workplaces. It has been done, for instance, by Indira Jaisingh's group which has asked for permission from the High Court to inspect prisons. So the union must ask for this power since it is a concerned party and has been working on this for a long time.

More and more we are seeing a global system where human life has no value. We in various movements have to push our dream, our vision, of a new society where human life is the centre. Human life is very precious. We need to oppose a system of production for profit. We need a new society where



production for life is emphasised, production that is linked to our needs, to self-reliance. We need a vision of a legal system that can deliver these goals. That vision is part of our larger vision for an equal society, for a development that really is people-centred, for a society where we will never hear such stories as we heard today.

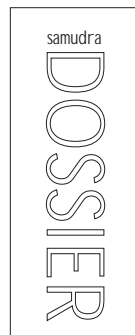


**Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1**

## Document IV

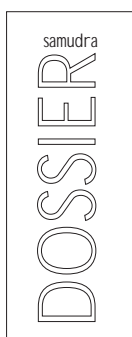
### Verdict of the Jury

1. We, the four members of the Jury on the Public Hearing on Women's Struggle for Survival in Fisheries organised by the National Fishworkers Forum and Women in Fisheries, have heard the testimonies of women who are working in seafood processing factories in Goa, Tamil Nadu, Bombay, Calcutta and Kerala and also read detailed reports presented by the following people/groups.
  - a. Report entitled 'The Seafood Processing Industry and the Conditions of Women Migrant Workers' by Aleyamma Vijayan, NFF/WIF, Cherureshmi Centre, Trivandrum.
  - b. Report entitled 'Girls and Women Employed in Prawn Processing' by Fr. R. V. Mathias, Executive Secretary, CBCI Commission of Labour, New Delhi.
  - c. Report on conditions of Women in Fisheries by Albertina Almedia of Bailancho Saad, Goa.
  - d. A Study on Problems and Prospects of Migrant Women Workers in Sea Food Industries at Veraval, Junagadh, Gujarat by Department of Social Work, Diocese of Rajkot.
  - e. Report on the Condition of Women in Fisheries in Calcutta by Minnie Joseph, freelance journalist and school teacher, and Fr. Y. De Steen Hault, St. Lawrence High School, Calcutta.
2. We also heard the testimonies of representatives of the Government of Kerala's Labour Department.
3. Testimony after testimony by women between ages of 17 and 60 gave us a vivid picture of the inhuman working and living conditions of women in fisheries. It is shocking to record that as the prices of shrimps and prawns go up, the price of human life is next to nothing. The life of these young women, capable of hard work, bearing great hardships who can still laugh and dream, is worth but a



few rupees a month. If they challenge the system they are thrown out of their jobs, far from home, vulnerable to exploitation. We heard at least one account of how a young woman died under suspicious circumstances.

4. Women and girls told us how they are hired for employment in shrimp factories by false promises of contractors, denied minimum wages, made to work for 10 to 12 hours in badly ventilated factories, inadequately protected from the cold and ice, threatened by ammonia leaks and denied their rights to even drinking water and health insurance.
5. The living conditions of these women are shocking. These young workers live in crowded rooms, often 30 to 35 in one room with just one or two bathrooms or toilets, and no privacy. The women are often not allowed to have even one day off or any holiday. The women suffer from numb blistered fingers, back and leg pain and are subjected to unhygienic conditions. In fact, most of these women are used as forced labour and are in servitude. From the testimonies of the women and the written reports presented, we see that it is not only their young fingers that are frozen and numb but their souls are also benumbed.
6. After hearing these testimonies by those who deposed at this public hearing, we are of the unanimous opinion that the provisions of the relevant labour laws have been totally violated, in particular the
  - i. Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970;
  - ii. Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation and Employment) Act 1979;
  - iii. Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act 1976;
  - iv. Minimum Wages Act 1948;
  - v. Factories Act; and
  - vi. ESI Act.





7. We are satisfied that the violations of these laws have resulted in the denial of fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India, in particular, Article 14 (the right to equality), Article 19(I), Article 21 (right of life), Article 23 (prohibition of trafficking in labour and forced labour), Article 24 (prohibition of employment of children in factories), read with Article 42 (provision of just and human conditions of work), Article 47 (duty of the state to raise the level of nutrition and public health).
8. In addition to violating the Constitution of India and statutory laws, it is also a violation of International Human Rights and International Labour Standards, specifically contained in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly

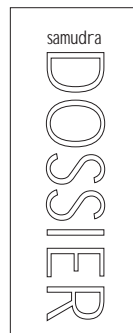
*Article 22:* the right of every member of society to social security and the right to realise through national effort and international co-operation, in accordance with the organization and resources of each state to the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for their dignity and free development of personality;

*Article 23:* the right of free choice of employment and just and fair conditions of work; and

*Article 24:* the right to leisure and holidays.

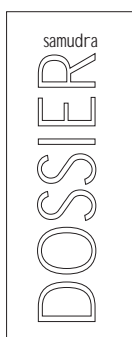
The conditions of the women also violate Convention 122 of the International Labour Organization concerning employment policy of the ILO (1969), read with the Declaration on the Right to Development 1986.

9. Neither the central or the state governments seem to have the will to enforce the labour laws. We record that not even a single contractor has been registered in Kerala as required under the Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of employment) Act 1979. If labour laws were implemented, the sufferings and pain of these young women would be alleviated to a large extent. Whenever there has been pressure on factory owners by activists, government or the local church leaders, the working and living conditions of women have improved.



However, the Government of India's main concern is with promoting exports at any cost, even at the cost of human life. In 1961, the government set up the Marine Product Export Promotion Council (MPEDC) jointly with exporters. The objectives did not include the protection of workers from exploitation. The Marine Products Development Authority (MPEDA) was then set up in 1972 as an autonomous body operating between the government and industry. The MPEDA, which is comprised of representatives from several ministries, members of parliament, the seafood industry and research institutions, does not have any representatives of labour or of the Ministry of Labour. Its objectives include market research, quality control and publicity but nothing related to the issues of labour in the export industry.

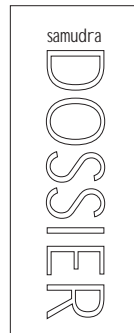
10. In our opinion, the women whose testimonies we have heard have been victims of three decades of export-oriented trade in the fisheries sector of the country. They are also likely to experience greater exploitation with the increasing domination of the Indian economy by the North in the name of globalization and the unfair trade relations imposed by the new legal regime set up after GATT. The greater emphasis on the export-orientation of the Indian economy under the New Economic Policy has led to a denial of access to natural resources, destruction of the traditional base of livelihood, large-scale unemployment and migration of workers, especially women.
11. We are of the opinion that in pursuing these policies, the government of India has failed in its duty to protect the natural resources of the country and subordinated them to foreign interests and has allowed unscrupulous contractors and factory owners to violate labour laws with impunity.
12. In the above-mentioned circumstances, we have the following suggestions to make:
  - a. Strengthen international solidarity between workers in all countries to ensure a non-selective enforcement of labour standards and indivisibility of human rights. We note that the National Fishworkers' Forum has



taken steps in that direction and ensured the presence of delegates from Senegal and Canada at this hearing.

- b. We call upon the Government of India to restructure its policies to ensure that the natural resources of the country are preserved for the people of the country and to ensure just and human-centred development based on principles of self-reliance.
- c. We call upon all State Government to ensure that labour laws are implemented through the active intervention and action of the labour and law enforcement machinery.

13. While these recommendations can help to improve the working and living conditions of women in fisheries, the problem will not be solved. The New World Order established by the World Trade Organization, which is financed and backed by multinational companies, will only allow production for profits by promoting export-oriented economies. We have to commit ourselves to a long struggle so that world production systems based on production for life not production systems based on production for profits are evolved. We have to evolve a jurisprudence which is based on the belief that each human being is a priceless asset. We need to develop a resurgent jurisprudence to protect workers from exploitation so that we never have to hear such painful testimonies again. This new jurisprudence will help to convert the pain of these women into a power to fight this unjust system. 🇮🇳



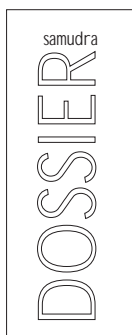
**Women in  
Fisheries  
Series  
No. 1**

## Document V

### Plans for Follow-up Action by the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF)

The NFF Executive Committee met on 25 June 1995 at the Mas Hotel Auditorium, Ernakulam. In the light of the public hearing on migrant women workers and other recent happenings, the following decisions were made:

1. It was decided to find out whether rules are framed as per the Inter-state Migrant Workers (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Service) Act 1979. If notifications are not yet issued, request for the same to the Authority concerned particularly on the registration of contractors. It was decided to identify the existing contractors and request the authority concerned to see that these contractors are registered and follow the Act.
2. It was decided to have a dialogue with the owners of the processing plants and the Labour Department in Gujarat with a view to implement the Act. Premjibhai Khokhari and Beckabhai will facilitate this process.
3. It was decided to organize the migrant women workers into a union with a view to have annual meetings and to see that the Act is implemented in all the processing factories. Here the judgement of the Jury should be taken very seriously.
4. It was decided to form a Sub-committee for Migrant Women Fish Workers in Processing Plants at a national level. This sub-committee is responsible for the implementation of all the decisions.



SAMUDRA Dossier

Women in Fisheries Series  
No. 1

Document relating to the Public Hearing on the  
Struggles of Women Workers in the  
Fish Processing Industry in India  
23 and 24 June 1995  
Cochin, Kerala, India

**Published by**  
International Collective in Support of Fishworkers  
27 College Road, Madras 600 006. India

**Edited by**  
SAMUDRA Editorial

**Designed by**  
Satish Babu

**Printed at**  
Nagaraj and Company Pvt. Ltd., Madras

The opinions and positions expressed in this Dossier  
are those of the authors concerned and do not  
necessarily represent the official views of ICSF.

Information contained in this publication may be reproduced freely.  
However, acknowledging ICSF would be appreciated.

ICSF, 27 College Road, Madras 600 006, India  
Tel: 91-44-8275303  
Fax: 91-44-8254457  
E-mail: [madras.fishnet@access.net.in](mailto:madras.fishnet@access.net.in)

## Women in Fisheries

The Women in Fisheries Programme of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers was initiated in 1993. Broadly, it aims to strengthen the participation of women in fishworkers' organizations and in decision-making processes at various levels.

Among the programme's specific objectives are attempts to study the history of women's roles in fisheries (the sexual division of labour), and to record accounts of their struggles against social marginalization.

As part of this documentation process, SAMUDRA Dossier will publish a series on Women in Fisheries. This is the first in the series. It puts together documents relating to a unique Public Hearing, held at Cochin, India in June 1995, on the problems faced by women workers in India's fish processing industry. Apart from a comprehensive report on the sector, this Dossier includes transcripts of oral testimonies of some of the women workers.