

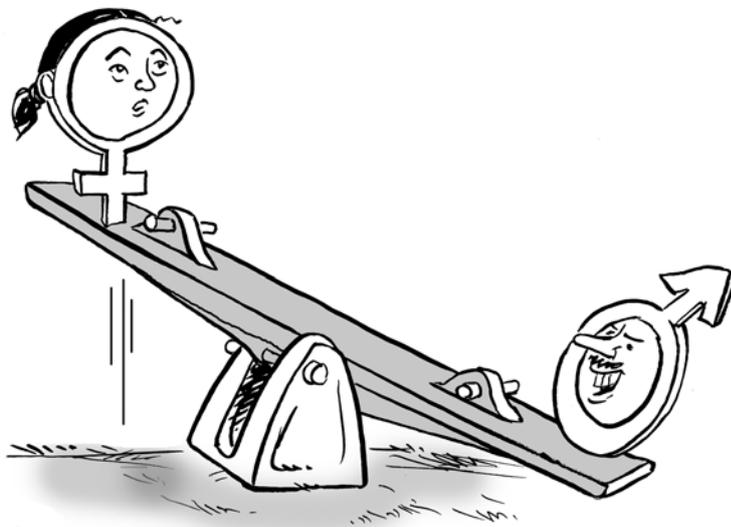
ARTICLE

Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power between the Sexes

Paul Thompson; *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 27, No 1, January 1985, pp 3 -32

This review is by
Chandrika Sharma and
Harini Kumar, ICSF

This article is an extremely insightful exploration of the sexual division of labour and power within fishing communities. Paul Thompson delves into the crucial and central roles played by women in fishing communities, and considers how far, and why, this contribution is reflected in the balance of domestic and communal power between the sexes. He notes that while there can be little argument about the prevailing male



dominance in Western societies, both in the past and today, within that overall framework there is immense variety in the degree to which women have been able to create space, independence and spheres of power for themselves.

The masculine image of the industry conceals, according to Thompson, the reality of an occupation which, by removing men to sea, makes them peculiarly dependent on the work of women. This dependence gives women not only more responsibility, but also the possibility of more power, both in the home and in the community.

However, while the sexual division of labour—the character of women’s work in fishing communities—often takes parallel forms in different societies, the same cannot be said for its consequences for the social position of women, or the power they enjoy. And this is the issue that the author explores at length.

He hypothesizes that the relatively higher ‘power’ enjoyed by women in fishing communities, as noted by some studies, could be linked to the spatial and economic dimension. With men away from home, the home (the spatial dimension) is perhaps a territorial power base for women. When combined with the dimension of economic responsibility, where the wife is responsible for the preparation and sale of the catch, there is a clear practical basis for her power. Because “them that sell the goods guide the purse—they that guide the purse rule the house”. And when women also control property, such as boats or land, the basis for their power is further enhanced.

However, much more is needed to understand the balance of power between the sexes. This is, the author notes, the result of a highly complex interaction, in which the economy, property, space, work and the culture of the family, religion and region, can, and do, play a vital part. And these variations in the balance of power will continue to be of critical importance to the way women in fishing communities live their lives. ❏



PUBLISHED BY
Chandrika Sharma for
International Collective
in Support of Fishworkers
27 College Road
Chennai 600 006
India
Tel: (91) 44 2827 5303
Fax: (91) 44 2825 4457
E-mail: icsf@icsf.net
Web site: www.icsf.net

EDITED BY
Nilanjana Biswas
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sandesh
(sandeshcartoonist@gmail.com)
DESIGNED BY
P. Sivasakthivel
PRINTED AT
Nagaraj & Company Pvt. Ltd.,
Chennai

Writers and potential contributors to *YEMAYA*, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable

fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.