

# Kerala's shrimp catchers under threat

**Women shrimp catchers, who fish in a sustainable manner and provide protein to local markets, are under threat of losing their health and livelihoods**

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The shrimp catchers of Vypin use the *thappiyedukkal* method of catching shrimp by sensing vibrations by hand, without fishing gear. This is also known as pulse fishing. Pulse fishing and knowledge of fishing cycles have been passed on for many generations. Most of the women report being self-taught in catching shrimp; learning by watching their mothers and grandmothers. They fish in open access canals, working in groups at a small distance from one another, and moving as a group, down the canal.

The women carry out all of the production and marketing, purchasing very few inputs. The women catch shrimp and market it immediately in the market of Vypin, a densely populated village in Kerala. This cuts out dependence on both middlemen and on ice, which in turn



decreases the input cost. Women are thus able to retain almost all their daily earnings.

On an average, a woman shrimp catcher earns about US\$ 0.81 per day. The shrimp catchers describe themselves as entrepreneurs and are very proud of their independence. Their income provides for survival but would not tolerate any major shocks to their health or ecosystem. The shrimp-catchers take care of each other despite being the most financially disadvantaged in the area. In September 2006, the full-time shrimp catchers joined a union that provides a savings plan for children's advanced education and for health emergencies. A small

monthly fee is collected from the members of the union towards this. Some of the younger women participate in shrimp catching on a part-time basis while attending school.

Shrimp is caught in canals round the year. During medium or lean seasons, some of the younger members of the group work in shrimp-peeling sheds as labourers. Since the harvest seasons for both rice and shrimp coincide, some women engage in both rice as well as shrimp harvesting during this time. From April to early June is the peak season for catching shrimp in canals and in *pokkali* (a local salt-tolerant rice variety) rice fields. Many of these women, though poor, are the primary or sole income earners of their families.

Sarasu, age 52, has eight members in her household. Shrimp catching is the main source of income as her husband is paralyzed and her two sons unemployed. Her two daughters-in-law are also shrimp catchers. Sarasu also works as a wage labourer to complement her income. Her day starts at 6:00 am, as she has to finish her household tasks before she goes out to catch shrimp. The fishing lasts for about three hours and is followed by a couple of hours at the market. She ends the day with household chores including firewood collection and drawing water from the well for the family.

Indira, aged 42, worked as a construction labourer until she began experiencing unbearable physical pain. Unmarried and with a mother to support, she was forced to take up shrimp catching. Her day starts at 5:00 am, and by 6:00 am, she wades into the water to catch shrimp. Indira is responsible for all the household chores.

Most women in shrimp catching have similar routines. Many women also take up seasonal work at shrimp processing plants. The income from processing plants only marginally increases these women's income as effluents from these plants pollute the canals thereby reducing the shrimp catch, their main income source.

The livelihoods of these shrimp catchers are under threat from various other activities including fishing. The dredging of canals to allow easy access to traditional fishing boats reduces shrimp catch.

According to these fishers, pollution has played havoc with the catch. The volume of the catch as well as the taste of the shrimp has been affected by fuel pollution from trawlers.

The growth of factories and industries, particularly the surge in fish and shrimp

processing in the area, has polluted the canals with toxic effluents, causing shrimp and fish to die. Bio-wastes from sheds clog the canals, killing shrimp larvae and juveniles. All these factors, together with an increase in the numbers of shrimp catchers, has led to a decline in the total shrimp catch as well as the catch per person.

The pollution in canals is also reported to cause various skin ailments, like rashes due to refrigeration effluents from the processing factories.

Women shrimp catchers, who fish in a sustainable manner and provide protein to local markets, are under threat of losing their

health and livelihoods as a result of larger economic development. The health of the canals where they catch shrimp is under threat from environmental change due to pollution and over-harvesting by large operators.

This situation needs to change quickly in order to avoid a total collapse of the fisheries. Fisheries must be regulated at the local level. The rights of women working in canals must be protected. Effluent release from processing plants into the canals must be strictly monitored. Fisheries companies must be made accountable to local people. ❏

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