

Women, the Eyes of the World

A recent workshop in Mumbai proposed strategies for enhancing women's roles in fisheries in India and how to meet the challenges facing their communities

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“Pengalia, Ulagil Kangalai...Women are the eyes of the world”, sang Pani Mary and Albin Mary on the first day of the workshop on women in fisheries held in Mumbai, India, from 1 to 3 February 2010. That clarion call set the tone for the next three days during which women from fishing communities around India discussed issues, debated ideas, and proposed strategies to address the various challenges facing them and their communities.

The workshop, titled “Enhancing Women’s Roles in Fisheries in India”, was organized to reflect on issues facing women of fishing communities, as workers and as members of communities and organizations, and to share local agendas and strategies, as well as to take stock of achievements and obstacles. It was also meant to create awareness about key policies and interventions relevant to women in fishing communities, and enhance the capacity of women fishworkers to participate in, and influence, decision-making processes affecting their lives and livelihoods.

The workshop attracted a total of 55 participants, mostly women, representing about 20 organizations and unions, from all nine coastal States/Union Territories, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The participants ranged from women directly engaged in processing, vending and trading fish, organized into associations, unions, co-operatives, societies, self-help groups and so on, to representatives of support non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Handling the language diversity of the group was a challenge, since as many as nine spoken languages could be heard at the workshop. However, a dedicated set of volunteer interpreters eased communication.

The workshop kicked off with participants splitting into three groups of three States each for the introductory session at which they provided information about their work, the issues facing them in their regions and the initiatives being taken by them. This process set out the gamut of issues and concerns of participants. The problems facing them were

identified—problems directly facing women as workers, such as poor market facilities and lack of access to credit and fish, to problems facing them as members of fishing communities, such as the lack of drinking water, proper sanitation, displacement and pollution. The session also listed out the various strategies used by women fishworkers to safeguard their interests, such as getting better organized, conducting protests and demonstrations, and seeking alternative employment avenues. The session helped women from different regions connect with one another around common issues.

The next session helped contextualize women’s experiences within the larger gamut of fisheries and coastal development in a rapidly globalizing economy. Using statistics and information related to fisheries development, management and trade, the session discussed how the fisheries sector is rapidly transforming, and becoming more fuel-, technology- and investment-intensive. It explored the implications of such changes on women in fishing communities, as workers and as members of fishing families and communities. With greater centralization of landings, for instance, women’s access to fish is declining as they have to compete directly with economically powerful merchants and export agents at harbours. Destructive fishing gears, like trawl nets, affect fish productivity and catches, as they destroy fishing grounds and result in enormous bycatch and killing of juveniles. The introduction of machine-made nets robbed the livelihoods of thousands of women earlier engaged in net-making. Greater exports, including of locally consumed species, is affecting the livelihoods of women processors, vendors and traders, who cater to local consumers. Higher investment in boats, engines and fuel, and the constant need for capital, is creating new forms of oppression for women, as the demand for dowry in some communities increases. The increasing costs of fishing operations and uncertain catches have fuelled violence and alcoholism within families. “We are fishing not for ourselves, but for oil and motor companies”, said some women, pointing to the fact that a majority of the income from fishing goes towards these costs. They pointed to the need to explore



55 participants, mostly women, at the ICSF workshop on "Enhancing Women's Role in Fisheries in India"

alternative forms and technologies for fishing and fisheries development, which would protect resources, livelihoods and communities.

On the second day of the workshop, participants were introduced to government schemes for women in the post-harvest sector. Information about various schemes was distributed, including in local languages, and participants were given time to discuss these schemes and comment on them and their implementation in their States. The feedback from participants was revealing. The coverage of schemes was often seen to be inadequate, and the implementation, poor. Several suggestions were made on how the situation can be improved, and how such schemes can be made more accessible and appropriate for women engaged in fisheries activities.

The post-lunch session dwelt on the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act 2008 and the National Policy for Urban Street Vendors. This session was facilitated by a resource person from Yuva, an organization that has been working closely with the urban poor in Mumbai. In the case of the unorganized workers Act, it was noted that while the Act itself needed to be strengthened and improved, it was nevertheless useful for workers to register under the Act. In the case of the vendor policy, the presenter shared the experiences of implementing the policy in Mumbai. He outlined various issues that women fish vendors must be careful about when seeking the implementation of the policy in their own towns/cities, to ensure that their interests are protected. The session drew a lot of interest, especially among women from Goa, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, who resolved to form or register already running informal unions to press for their rights, as vendors, to be recognized.

On the last day of the workshop, participants were introduced to the debate around the Draft Marine Fisheries (Regulation and Management) Act (MFRMA), 2009. While a comprehensive legislation for the regulation and management of fisheries resources in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) has been a long-standing demand of NGOs and unions such as the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), there is need to ensure that the objectives of the Act and its provisions include the protection of the livelihood security of traditional fishing communities and their preferential rights to access fish resources in all the maritime zones of India. Participants stressed that women need to be part of the consultative process for finalizing the Act, to protect their own interests, the interests of their communities, and the long-term sustainability of resources. They pointed out that women's interests and access to fish are best protected when fish landings are diversified, beach-based and small-scale.

Participants also discussed the provisions of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification of 1991, its poor implementation, the various attempts to dilute it as well as recent efforts to replace it altogether, with a new notification. Participants expressed their opposition to the dilution of the CRZ Notification, and efforts to replace it. In the face of strong opposition from fishing communities, the Ministry of Environment and Forests had assured fishing communities that no new Notification would be introduced. However, given the enormous pressure on coastal resources from tourism, port development, industry, urban growth and so on, and the consequent displacement and other hardships faced by communities, there is need for constant vigil. There is also need to ensure that the CRZ Notification is better implemented to guarantee greater protection of coastal resources. The rights of fishing communities to their lands and resources ought to be protected. Fishing communities in India have their task cut out, and women are ready for the struggle, said participants.

The final session of the workshop discussed strategies and steps for the future. Several State groups said that they would spread the information they had gathered at the workshop, strengthen their existing organizations and register their unions. They also said they would seek formal registration as workers. Several women participants from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu said that they would engage more with *panchayat* (local government) processes to protect fishing community interests, while participants from Maharashtra shared their plans of getting hold of the coastal management plan for the State. The women

from Maharashtra also said that they would fight for their right to small fish for sale in domestic markets—such fish is now either being reduced to fishmeal or exported. Participants also stressed the need to network among themselves and support one another. They said regular workshops of this nature would improve access to information about developments of relevance to fishing communities. They also requested help in documenting some of the challenges being faced, for example, the rapid industrialization of the Kutch coast and its impact on fishing communities.

For many women participants, the workshop was perhaps the first of its kind. It helped expose participants to policies, schemes and legislation relevant to fishing communities, and provided an opportunity to discuss common issues and strategies. As Ashwini Sawant, a fish vendor from Goa remarked, “This is the first time that we have an exclusive platform to discuss our issues and our future in fisheries. We hope that such workshops are held regularly, if possible at regional levels to discuss women’s issues in each State”.