

Tsunami, war and difficult recovery

This report on the struggle of fishing communities of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, to recover from both civil war and the tsunami of 2004, is based on the author's visit there and meetings with local women leaders in June 2012

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Batticaloa, a district on the east coast of Sri Lanka, has been badly affected by both the ethnic-based civil war in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. The district is now one of the poorest regions of Sri Lanka. Fisheries and agriculture are the most important livelihood activities of the district. I visited the area last June and had a meeting with women leaders of local fisher communities, who revealed to me their situation and hopes.

Batticaloa and Amparai were the districts worst affected by the 2004 tsunami. Many people, in particular women and children, lost their lives. A total of 9,517 fisher families lost their assets and livelihoods for several months. Subsequent to the tsunami, when NGOs and government authorities supplied fishing families with gear and other assets, there were several discrepancies in the distribution. As a result, the fisher families were weakened in their co-operative and collaborative efforts rather than empowered for sustainability and development. Many fisher families also had been relocated far from their original villages

and workplaces, which meant a big change to their way of life.

Three years after the tsunami, a large-scale war erupted in the east of Sri Lanka and was most severe in Batticaloa. This again disrupted the local society. Due to a ban on sea fishing and restrictions in several fishing areas on the time and type of gear local fishermen could use for fishing, and due to destruction of infrastructure, the fisher families once again lost most of their ability for income generation.

Normalcy returned in 2009 but new forms of conflict in fishing escalated as illegal fishing increased in the traditional fishing areas of local fishing communities. A new body of fisheries societies at the district level was formed under the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. This replaced the existing District Federation of Fisheries Co-operative Societies (FCS) that was functioning to bring out the issues of fishermen and resolve them with the authorities at district and regional levels. However, this new body is not active or efficient in bringing solutions to the issues of local fishers, because it is controlled by the ministry, based on a top-down approach. In this situation, a vast number of fishing resources are being destroyed or captured by wealthy and influential fishermen. Big fishermen (using multi-day boats) and traders from the ethnic majority community from other parts of the country arrived and established their stake in the fishing resources and the 70-mile-long shoreline of the district, depriving local fishing families of their opportunities for income generation. Large-scale outside investors are taking over coastal and mangrove lands for the development of the tourism industry and prawn farms, which do not give local fishing families any long-term benefits.

A recent (2010) household income and expenditure survey revealed that 20 per cent of the population of Batticaloa district live below the poverty line. Most fishing families have borrowed money or mortgaged their assets, and got entrapped in a vicious cycle of exploitation. Communal feelings and hatred are on the rise among the local fishing communities, who generally belong to the Tamil ethnic minority and who feel treated as a lost community in an ethnic war.

The women revealed to me the hardships that women of fishing communities of

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Women in the district of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka would like to see effective fisheries management with their active participation

Batticaloa face at present. Many households have lost their male breadwinners and have become female-headed. Besides having the burden of taking care of the family alone, women without husbands (widows, deserted or with missing husbands) suffer also from a low status in society. Violence against women, and child abuse have become frequent. Women also are not aware about their legal rights.

During the war, many girls from fishing communities were conscripted by the militants (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). I was told that of the female ex-combatants arrested by the Sri Lankan army after the war, a large group (around 1,860) was from fishing communities. They now need to be 're-integrated'. However, most of them are traumatized, have little education, few skills and are in poor health. Many are also physically disabled. It appears that women-headed households bear the main burden of caring for these (injured) female ex-combatants and traumatized former child soldiers.

Though fisher and other families in Batticaloa have been displaced, dispossessed and dispirited by the long-running war and the 2004 tsunami, matrilineal traditions and support provided by matrilineal kinship networks seemed to have survived (Batticaloa has a matrilineal society). These female support networks seem to be of enormous value for emotional stability and feelings of security. However, women receive very little outside support and professional help. There are also practically no opportunities for them to set up small businesses or find other sources of employment to generate adequate income.

Women in Batticaloa used to be actively involved in fisheries, but this has changed, in particular, after the disruption caused by the 2004 tsunami and the war. The women in our meeting felt there was great potential for women to develop livelihood activities in fisheries, but that they lacked the necessary skills and resources. There are several NGOs that target women for microcredit projects. However, as the women revealed to me, these quite often resulted in an increased burden for the women, as they could not repay the loans. I was told that, in several cases, husbands had even left their wives because of the problems of repaying loans. The women told me that they felt a great need for training on fish marketing, fish processing with upgraded technology, and financial and business management.

The women also felt very worried about the destructive impact of illegal fishing and gear conflicts, and felt the need to do something about it. They would like to see effective fisheries management with active participation of the local fishing communities.

Women of fishing communities, however, are not represented in the formal fisheries societies. The women leaders of fishing communities, with whom I had the meeting, would very much like to see this changed to be able to take their interests and concerns forward to the fisheries authorities and other concerned officials. They also indicated being very interested to connect with women of traditional small-scale fishing communities in other parts of Sri Lanka to break their isolation and learn from new experiences, as also for the purpose of enhancing ethnic reconciliation and solidarity linkages. ❏

Though families in Batticaloa have been displaced and dispirited by war and the 2004 tsunami, matrilineal traditions and support networks have survived and provide emotional stability.