

A dialogue begins

An important dialogue between Mumbai's women fish vendors, State officials and researchers on livelihood security is kickstarted by an ICSF study

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During 2-3 December 2012, women fish vendors, fishworker union representatives, government officials, researchers and others met at a workshop to discuss ICSF's study on women fish vendors in Mumbai, India. Women of fishing communities in Mumbai have traditionally dominated fish vending in the city, and fish markets developed in locations where they customarily sold fish. Nevertheless, over the years, women fish vendors have been facing problems in pursuing their livelihoods. The workshop sought to outline strategies to secure their livelihoods in the changing urban landscape of Mumbai.

Participants on the first day of the two-day workshop held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) included grassroots organizations like the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samittee (MMKS), a trade union, the National Hawkers Federation (NHF), YUVA (a non-governmental organization), women fish vendors, fishworker leaders, and researchers.

The workshop commenced with Ujjwala Patil, the organizer from MMKS, sharing her experiences of working with women vendors in the city and describing the challenges that they face. The ICSF researcher, Shuddhawati Peke, then presented the findings of the study on "Women Fish Vendors in Mumbai". The study had specifically focused on vendors in government-run and private markets, street vendors and door-to-door vendors. Some of

the themes running through her discussions with fish vendors, she said, were the lack of basic infrastructure such as clean water and sanitation. Street vendors are exposed to the ever-present threat of eviction. Door-to-door or peripatetic vendors, she said, were especially concerned about access to customers since the growing number of gated communities bar the entry of hawkers. The contentious plan to redevelop markets through private developers, under the private-public partnership (PPP) model, was also brought up.

Peke's presentation highlighted the demand by vendors that funds for redevelopment should come from government agencies such as the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) rather than from private developers, whose main interest was to establish their hold over high-value commercial space in whatever manner possible, including by displacing fish vendors from their traditional market spaces. Vendors' demands for better facilities, access to fish, and social security measures were also highlighted.

Raju Bhise of YUVA, who has experience of organizing the urban poor, spoke of the need to recognize fishing communities as indigenous communities in the city, given that they are the original inhabitants of Mumbai. He also spoke of the need to protect their spaces. Bhise emphasized the need for fishing communities to engage with the process around Mumbai's Development Plan (DP), currently underway, to ensure that their settlements, markets, vending spaces and so on are reflected in it, and that provisions are made for the establishment of new markets and other space-related requirements of fishing communities.

Post-lunch, members of the NHF shared their experiences from various States in India. They talked of the initiative of creating hawkers' zones in the city of Bhubaneswar, Odisha, and of incorporating the participation of hawkers in the process. From Mumbai, several women fish vendors spoke of the travails of vending in markets. Usha Tamore of the Mumbai District Women's Co-operative Limited highlighted how traders tamper with the scales, short-changing vendors in the process. There was agreement that such problems need to be solved through careful monitoring by women vendors' associations.

Responding to the problem raised by women fish vendors regarding migrants from other States taking over their spaces, Pankaj Bhawe from the fishing community said that

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The participants outlined strategies to secure the livelihoods of women fish vendors in the changing urban landscape of Mumbai

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instead of blaming the migrants for muscling in on what was traditionally fisherwomen's business, it is important to learn from them. The migrants work in groups to buy fish, reducing costs, and are thus more competitive. Bhave suggested that the women should consider doing the same. He also expressed concern over the reluctance of co-operatives in the State to market fish locally, though they supply to exporters. Bhave also suggested that the women fish vendors investigate the possibility of selling value-added fish products along with their traditional merchandise of dry and fresh fish.

At the end of the day, the participants compiled the proposals to be shared with the government officials who would be participating in the second day's programme. Key proposals included the following: the establishment of a State policy for street vendors; the provision of better infrastructure and facilities in markets and landing centres; the prioritization of the public sector model over the public-private partnership model for market redevelopment, which, additionally, should not only involve vendors at all stages but also ensure transparency by making all redevelopment plans and proposals accessible online; the granting of licences to all legitimate vendors through a transparent process; and, finally, the development of new fish markets in keeping with the rapid expansion of the city. The suggestion for a new wholesale market also came up along with the demand for social security, capacity building, and training for vendors.

The second day of the workshop began with a recap of the previous day's discussions for the benefit of new participants. The officials from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), responsible for the management of markets, said that while they were unable, at this point, to make any promises, they would share the vendors' concerns and demands with other officials at BMC. They also explained that while

conditions at some markets were less than ideal, it was not true of all markets. In some cases, since the government plans to redevelop certain markets, temporary repairs have been halted. Officials from the State Fisheries Department also responded to the proposals of the vendors. They highlighted some of the work underway to improve existing harbours and landing centres in the city. They were requested to ensure that the concerns of the women vendors, like sanitation and access to auction halls and storage space, are addressed in this process. It was pointed out, however, that this does not lie in the hands of the Fisheries Department as harbours fall within the purview of the Bombay Port Trust Authority. The need for women vendors' organizations to make their demands known to the other relevant departments was highlighted. The Fisheries Department was also asked to ensure social-security coverage for women fish vendors and to ensure that they are provided with compensation for the oil spill that took place in 2011, due to which women vendors, for no fault of their own, had to suffer huge losses.

Usha Tamore intervened to raise the issue of eviction of vendors from a market near Pikale Hospital, pointing out that the vendors were being evicted for redevelopment though the market was not under BMC. She added that the women would welcome the redevelopment if the money came from other government bodies such as the NFDB and if the women were given a say over what happens with the extra space created. The women were invited for further discussions on the issues raised with BMC and the Fisheries Department.

While the workshop highlighted the shortcomings of the State in protecting the livelihood needs of women fish vendors, it also brought to light the need for the women to be proactive. Currently, the women are not an organized or cohesive group, making it difficult to ensure that their voices are heard. ❏