

Hard days and nights

Hardships at work, a lack of support at home, and little or no social security combine to create a bleak future for women fishsellers in Mangalore, India

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Mangalore is a port city situated in the west coast state of Karnataka in India. The city hosts both large-scale and small-scale fisheries along its coastline. Traditionally, fishermen catch the product and sell it at a daily auction in the harbour to women vendors, who thereafter transport the goods to the market for commercial sale. The trade starts early in the morning, when the fishermen return to the harbour from their nightly fishing. The women fish vendors therefore also start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold or the sun goes down. One woman described her working day: "I have to sit around a lot, and that makes my body ache. It's also very hot in the sun and my eyes hurt. I have to take medicines for pain, and am often too unwell to work and am forced to stay at home for days in a row."

The marketplace is very hot, humid and unhygienic, with mosquitoes everywhere. The women have to sit in uncomfortable positions all day, which is bad for their health. They also need to work long hours to make the work profitable. All the women said that they would generally be at work as long as the sun was up. They claimed that if the lights

at the market had been functioning they would have worked even longer hours. They work through the year. One woman said that she sold fish on all except six days in a year. Older women vendors find it difficult to sustain a reasonable income from the profession.

On an average, a fish vendor makes around Rs 100 (USD 1.50) a day. There could be days when the market is slow, and she ends up with no profit or even a loss for the day. This economic model has forced women into taking loans daily. Most fish vendors do not have any savings, and many have substantial debts. Given their financial status the vendors cannot access banks, and are forced to borrow money from private lenders, very often at usurious rates of interest.

The women have to pay a fee of Rs 10 (USD 0.15) per day to the city corporation for their vendor space in the market. This works out to around a tenth of their daily income. For this payment, the vendors do not get any service from the corporation, beyond the use of the market space. The corporation does not feel obliged to arrange for waste removal, lighting, etc. Discontent with the way in which the marketplace is organized and the total lack of any facilities has provoked the vendors in the past to organize strikes and protests. However, these protest actions have not got them any real attention from the corporation, whose office bearers add that such protests are not their concern but rather an issue for the police.

The women get their livelihood from local fish stocks but have no control over how fish reserves are exploited. They therefore also face future declines in the amount of fish available for daily sales.

After an entire day, from dawn to dusk, spent in procuring fish and selling it at the marketplace, the women return home to all the tasks of housework. The domestic sphere is their sole responsibility, and they get no support from husbands. This daily grind of sweaty work in extremely poor working conditions, followed by the total lack of support from husbands towards sustaining the family, leaves the women with very little energy to even think of changing their lives or destiny. It robs them of energy to stick up for their rights and protest against the daily oppression. Society also reinforces this view of them being relatively powerless. According

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Auction at Bund fish market, India. The women fish vendors start their day in the early morning and work through the day till their stocks are sold

to a former union activist, women are neither viewed by society, nor even by themselves, as able to shape their own destinies. The social structures determined by poverty, gender and class that surround them, form their identities and deny them the spirit to try and change their circumstances.

What, then, are the possibilities for effecting improvement and benefiting fish vendors? First, communication between the women and different local institutions must be improved. The women should be empowered to have greater influence in the decisions regarding the market structure, as this deeply affects their dignity and democratic rights. The corporation must also be prevailed upon to visit the market and gain more local knowledge. Today, they only

get the information once a year, through a third party, and this is not sufficient. The local community must also provide better legislation concerning the exploitation of the resource to avoid over-fishing. On a socio-economic level, in order to increase the vendor's level of agency, it would be beneficial to provide better security such as sickness benefits. Thereby, women might not need to take daily loans and end up trapped in debt. The union's solution is focused on providing more favourable loans. While beneficial in the current circumstances, this might not help in the long run. Finally, opportunities for education for young women in the fisheries sector will give them the opportunity to switch to other sectors if the fish sector breaks down. ❏