

Interview of Mercy Antony, fish vendor from Adimalathurai (literally means the coastal village below the hill), Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India

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How long have you been selling fish?

I have been working for the last seven years as a fish vendor at Mukkola fish market in Kerala. We sell mostly marine fish, and, occasionally, dry fish. We reach the market either in the morning at 7 or 10 am, or in the afternoons at 2. 00 pm. There are about 20 women fish vendors working at Mukkola.

What are the problems you face?

Our fish markets don't have even the most basic facilities for women to work: no toilets; no water to clean fish; no permits to sell fish without interference from male fish vendors. The market buildings have not been designed with our needs in mind, and particularly during monsoon and summer time, sitting and selling fish is most difficult here. Often, male men fish vendors misbehave with us; they are violent, and sometimes they even destroy our fish baskets. Because of this social situation, at times even consumers behave without a sense of propriety. We urgently need proper transport facilities to take our fish to fish markets.

Are you part of any union or organization?

I have studied only up to the 7th grade, and until recently, I was not aware of what we could demand as our legitimate rights as fish vendors from the Government, from the Municipal Corporation, and so on. I learnt about all this only after joining the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Union. As a member of the union, I feel I am not alone anymore and that we must collectively fight for our rights.

Are there any demands you have of the government?

Recently on TV, I listened to the budget speech of the Minister [in charge of Fisheries] outlining a number of schemes for the fishing community. Unfortunately, from experience we know that the implementation of such schemes is very poor. As fish vendors, we do not get any benefits except under MATSYAFED (Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries Development). MATSYAFED schemes are generally good, and they have also promised to set up a Women Fish Vendors' Cooperative society at Adimalathurai soon. Apart from this, we need financial assistance with low interest loans from the Government. At the moment, we pay interest rates as high as 24- to 60 percent on loans taken from private individuals and financial institutions. We also need financial assistance for house construction and children's education; identity cards for women fish vendors; women fish vendors' Cooperative societies, uniforms for selling of fish; and training in the management of Cooperative societies. ❏