

## Women must recover their spaces

**Despite a long period of debate, the important issue of a gender perspective in fisheries has not received enough attention, says Nalini Nayak**

---

**How was the Women in Fisheries programme conceived? What was the need for a separate programme for women?**

The reason we felt we needed a special programme for women in fisheries was because, although in the ICSF we always stressed the role of women in fisheries, we realized that the member unions that participate in the network did not really have a gender perspective. Neither did they see the seriousness of protecting women's spaces in fisheries.

Initially, when the Animation Team decided to also have this as a funded programme of ICSF, the members were not very clear about how it should evolve. But we thought that we should particularly develop a consciousness on gender issues within the unions that related to the network.

So, that is why this is a very specific action programme. It is not a research programme but basically an action-oriented programme. We are studying what women are doing, particularly in the unions that were interested in developing this perspective. We included the specific countries where unions were participating in the network.

Further, we wanted to have a fair share between the North and South because we knew that fisheries are affected by North-South relations and the development of fisheries is part of this whole North-South relation. There was also the whole context of the globalization of the labour market and the fact that women are the main reserve in the international labour market.

These factors affect the role of women as workers and in whatever spaces they

otherwise had in the post-harvest activities. So, that is the reason why we also saw it important to include countries of the North.

The first intensive year saw a kind of international co-ordination of the programme. This year was basically to initiate thinking on these issues, to visit the countries that were participating and then to raise the debate in those countries. Launching the programme was achieved in the first year.

At the workshop which we finally had in Cebu, the ideological thrust and the framework of the programme was discussed with all the members of the participating countries. That was a very exciting workshop because we realized that many issues as well as the whole perspective of gender was very new. Although people had talked about women and women's participation, talking from an evolving perspective of gender relations was something new.

At the major Cebu Conference, we had initially thought of having one workshop on Women in Fisheries, the gender perspective, along with the five other workshops. But then we dropped this workshop mainly because we thought that gender issues had to be discussed in all the workshops and should not be something which is sidetracked or which only one group of people talked about. The gender question had to be integrated into all the discussions related to fisheries. So, it was with that perspective that we dropped the specific workshop on gender.

We had a small preparatory meeting with all the women who came to participate in the conference, explaining why we had dropped the workshop and what would be our role in each of the other workshops.

So I think it was quite clear when we started off, what the role of the women participants would be in the different workshops.

**A**nd I think that women really took this role consciously in each of the workshop. In all the reports from the workshops, there were very specific mentions made on issues related to women.

But what I think was very distressing was that these things were not picked up. You know, we are not people who are talking about women's issues just for the sake of talking about women's issues. All of us are very committed to the broader perspective of women and unions and the issues of the fishworkers at large.

I feel that some of these very sensitive things were overlooked in the final writing of the Cebu Conference document. Therefore, we have lost quite a bit of the specific contributions made by those women in those specific workshops.

As a result of this, we were then disappointed that we had dropped the specific workshop on women. I particularly felt that—and this was what most women felt—we should not have dropped it if there was no real sensitivity in the larger group. But maybe we should have been much more forceful in the final document. Maybe we can achieve that at another step. But this was a pity, a real

pity, because after the workshop, people realized why it was important.

So, we finally concluded that if at all we have another such conference in the future, there should be a specific workshop on gender questions which should be made compulsory for everybody to participate in. In this way, we will really be able to emphasize and discuss why this perspective is important. This is what we would like to tell the organizers of the next conference.

**But why were these objections not raised at Cebu—after all, there was a stage between the preparation of the draft and final conference statement?**

True, there was time, many efforts were made and people did write down their objections, but I have a feeling it all depends on the extent to which we are conscious of these issues, only then can we build it up into the final document.

**Was it because no woman was involved in the final drafting of the conference statement?**

Finally, we thought so too. You know, we don't distrust our men who write but it probably just gets passed off like that. Though they had worked hard on it and there were one or two mentions of the women's issues, what was disappointing was the lost opportunity, the way in which the whole thing could have been well worked out.

Particularly in the workshops on transnational linkages, technology and the environment, where the labour force is being exploited, not sufficient mention has been made of the impact on women. It is mentioned only in passing. There could have been a specific paragraph on the issue because we also recommended that ICSF take up a special study on this question.

We had women from the processing industries of Fiji, Solomon Islands and France, from countries where women were losing their work, as well as from countries where they were gaining work. Specific mentions could have been made of these to give more flesh to the Cebu Conference statement. This did not happen. It was all just mentioned in passing.

We are so disappointed, we expected much more understanding from the people who wrote the final statement. Many of them are, after all, very conscious of our perspective. They could have done something. But they just got carried away.

**What about the separate workshop on Women in Fisheries which you held later? Did that result in any sort of statement?**

The second meeting was a workshop, not a conference. It was mainly meant to discuss the framework and the perspective. While we could really further our understanding, the workshop revealed to me that most of us are so unconscious of these questions that we were only starting. It was only a beginning.

At an international level, one would have expected to further the debate and analysis. But we could not do this at all. I expected we could go ahead but no, we were only starting.

Those of us who had worked longer on the question realized you had to go slow; people were just beginning to understand.

But since people were so interested and committed, it was very fruitful because they felt they had learned something and could go back and work on it.

The participation of Senegal in our women's workshop was superb because we had held a big seminar in Senegal, where we highlighted the issues that relate specifically to women. These issues, in turn, got discussed at their national conference. So, those participants came and spoke very enthusiastically at the workshop. Everybody was surprised that Senegal had come with some issues and the participants knew what they were talking about. For some countries like Fiji, we had sent outlines on what should be written. That's why so many women presented so many papers on the first day. Those papers were those prepared for our women's workshop.

**This issue of gender is today a major point of discussion in all sectors, whether social, cultural or economic. But is there something in the fisheries sector which makes the question much more stark and specific? How would you articulate that? Put simply, what is so special about the issue of women in fisheries?**

This is my personal point of view and it is what we tried to emphasize in Cebu. We had related the whole question of production—the production of commodities and the production of life. This is what all life is about—either you are producing something to consume or you are producing another generation.

The production of the next generation is something that is just left to women, while the production of commodities is something that is everybody's business. It is only that calculation that goes into GNP and all that. So, we tried to highlight why the production of life is very important and that is where all the exploitation of women takes place. Gender awareness is really built on this whole basis that producing the next generation is not the sole biological responsibility of women, it is the social responsibility of all human beings to care, whether you are male or female.

But this fact of the production of life has to do also, specifically in fisheries, with a live resource that we are relating to, which is fish. And fish has its own reproductive time, it has its own cycle, it has its own nurturing necessities. If you destroy the

environment, you are not going to get any more fish.

So, you see, these relations of nurture, of production time, of reproduction time, are all very much related to this whole reproduction of life. And in today's society, the burden of reproduction of life is something which is not paid for. In our society we don't have a calculation for unpaid labour, for nurture activity. We only have calculations for production activity.

This nurturing and the time factor that is necessary to reproduce a resource has to do with life. I feel this sensitivity of a respect for the environment and for nature has also to do with the respect for life.

In fisheries, if we are really conscious of gender, we would really be conscious also of this resource we are interacting with.

We can't exploit it at the rate we are exploiting today; we can't use the technologies we are using today. Whatever we use has to be in relation to the kind of living resource we are dealing with.

All this has to do with the Way we have exploited a sex in our society. The way modern society is evolving, it is very competitive, it gives value only to the productive ages in life, while everything else doesn't matter.

Imbalances exist and because of these imbalances and our disrespect for the sustaining of life, I feel the whole perspective in thinking of a sustainable fishery has to be in terms of a nurture fishery which respects life, which respects spaces for people. This, then, is definitely a very feminist perspective.

At Cebu, we didn't start off with the women's question, we started off with production, what production is all about, where does fisheries production lie in all this. Then we went into the production of commodities and life.

We put it only in that perspective, not in the way some others would merely rant that women are exploited, and so on. No, instead, we looked at fisheries and what is the sexual division of labour and how to analyse that.

Only by looking at it from this point of view can we see it more globally. Otherwise, we come off just being defensive.

**But several women themselves do not seem to recognize this parallel between the nurture aspect of fisheries and their own lives.**

Because we have been driven to this. It is a survival strategy now that you exploit a resource in order to survive. No traditional community is exploitative. Traditional communities had very strict norms of their relations with nature.

When you used certain kinds of nets, you knew what sizes of fish you would catch. There were very strict norms. Now, as social controls and norms have deteriorated because technology has turned superior, the disrespect for nature has also crept in.

**Does the Women in Fisheries programme have a component to raise the consciousness of women about these issues?**

This is what we have been talking about and what we think movements should integrate into their whole awareness programmes. Take, for instance, coastal zone management. The experience in the Philippines, for example, is quite ridiculous. There, women are the actual sea wardens.

These poor women, who are not paid, protect the sea for their traditional fishermen so that the trawlers don't come and take their catch.

Yet these women have no right to the fish once it is landed on the shore. It's all in the hands of the merchants.

What's the point of protecting fish when you have no right to it afterwards? So, part of coastal zone management is also to protect the space of women in post-harvest activity, not only to protect the resource.

This is why we are saying that we must be conscious, even men must be conscious of the need to protect the spaces in the economy that women once held. You have to still continue to protect them.

**Was this perspective shared by everybody at the workshop?**

It was so new for everybody. Some of them, even long-standing activists, came up and said, only now do we realize what gender actually means.

Or take the question of technology. The North has never questioned technology. They have never even seen it like that, related to the environment, while in the women's movements in India, we are all the time talking about these questions.

**And are there distinctions within the women's movements?**

First of all, there is a big distinction between the women in the movement who belong to autonomous groups and women like us who work with women in the movement. That is a big dividing line.

Women working with this autonomous women's perspective take up very different issues from those we take up in movements. And within movements, you also have those who work in sectors based on natural resources and those who work on, for instance, dams or construction workers, where the issues are not related to a basic resource.

Our perspective has evolved from those of us who work in a sector which relates to a common property natural resource. We have very consciously not gone off alone. We have worked within the movement to develop this consciousness.

I think the fishworkers' movement is very special. Those of us working in the sector have tried to understand fisheries, therefore we can relate the perspective to fisheries. People working with agricultural workers, for instance, only take up wage issues. Nobody looks at the production of food or cash crops and how women are marginalized and why we should therefore fight. If you don't analyse your sector and see what spaces exist and why, you can not do much.

We thought that, through these Women in Fisheries programme, we could develop this perspective. The idea was first presented as a paper in Bangkok. We felt that, through the programme, this paper could get some flesh and a more global perspective and, over two or three years, we could come out with an official document of ICSF.

So, the process started but we didn't make the progress I thought we could make-You know, you have to interact with people who are thinking on these issues, it may happen over time. But the fact that people in ICSF are speaking about nurture and sustainable fisheries has also to do with this. It will slowly come.

**At what stage is the programme?**



The country programmes are independent. Each country has made its own programme. These will go on. Then ICSF should commission the study on women in the international market in fisheries. Exchange programmes have been organized between a number of countries. Further, Latin America has decided to join the programme. It was not in earlier. Eventually, maybe in two years or so, after people have done some work and experimentation, we can have one more workshop.

**Is this marginalization of women universally true in all the world's fisheries?**

I think so.

**But don't women in the South East Asian countries still have access to the spaces they once held traditionally?**

That depends. We haven't really analysed this. Women do play a role in the marketing chains in the Bangkok and Manila fish markets, like the big markets of Navota, where thousands of women are present at the landing centres, some of whom are big merchants and some, agents for merchants.

Of course, that is another class of women, not women who have traditionally done fish vending. These are women who have money to invest and so enter the merchant field.

In Ghana, for instance, women also invest in the purchase of craft. I haven't seen this happen in the other countries I have visited. In Vishakapatnam in India, for instance, women advance money to the trawlers so that they have a right to their catch. So, these kinds of activities exist and women have got into those niches. But whether the old spaces have been retained, that's a million dollar question. They have been for the most part, commercialised.

**With the way the global economy is now getting integrated, do you ever foresee a situation where women will be able to carve out a niche for themselves? Or will they necessarily be subsumed under the larger process and then have to work within those constraints? Are you trying to glorify a lost era?**

(Long pause) But then, in that case, there is no need to fight. We may as well close down our unions, if we think that the cause is lost. The reason why we are carrying on in this sector is because the sector doesn't lend itself to this kind of development. If the sector lent itself so, then there is no cause to fight. But this sector does not do this. So, one has to fight and see what role women are going to play.

**That may be true, but within the sector, is there ever going to be a separate space for women?**

Oh, yes, I am positive about that because, if at all the fishery has to be sustained, it has to be decentralized. You can not go on with this kind of centralization that we think is modern development. We are basically fighting for a decentralized fishery. 3

Nalini Nayak. Co-ordinator of ICSF's Women in Fisheries programme, is a social activist who has worked in the women's movement, particularly in India. SAMUDRA interviewed her in Trivandrum, where she is largely based