

Round table of women in fisheries

A state-wide round table of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, India, not only reveals a range of priority issues but also starts a process of self-organization

By **Mariette Correa**
(mariettec@gmail.com),
Senior Programme
Co-ordinator, ICSF

On the 19 February, 2017, a round table of 30 women in various small-scale fisheries related activities was held in Goa, India. This meeting was a follow-up to a workshop held in November 2016 where 63 women from the coastal districts of India gathered together for three days to discuss the issues they faced, and to learn about the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) as well as schemes and laws relevant to them and how these could be used. Five women from Goa participated in the November workshop and were motivated to carry forward the work in their state. It also resonated for Saad Aangan, a Goa-based gender resource group, which has felt the need over the years, to consolidate the experiences of women in small-scale fisheries in Goa, to take the concerns forward.

Not much has been done at the state level in Goa on the issues faced by women in small-scale fisheries. Their concerns have been subsumed under the overall issues of small-scale fishing communities which come to the fore when there are specific incidents or immediate threats to their livelihoods, as, for example, with the pressures on the coastal lands or waters due to development or tourism. Therefore, to begin with, there was a need to collect information and meet with various groups or representatives of women involved in fisheries, including those who were involved with local level struggles.

Representatives of Saad Aangan and International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) visited parts of Goa to meet with women. It soon became apparent that certain occupational groups (represented by individual women) would be unable to come to the meeting on 19 February. They were asked to share their concerns which were then presented in the larger group at the round table. Across Goa, there are small markets where a few women (between three and eight, on an average) sit either on the streets or in the markets selling their fish. They travel to the big towns in the early hours of the morning, buy the fish from the wholesalers and then travel back in time to get the morning customers at the market squares.

These women survive on their daily earnings and being absent for a day would cause considerable loss. More importantly, many of them are cynical about a resolution of their issues, and may not be sufficiently convinced about the idea of presenting their issues to larger groups nor feel their issues are representative of many other women in similar situations. Some, in fact, pointed to the wholesalers who they said would know of their issues, have helped them in the past and could represent them. However, post the round table it was clear that more efforts would need to be placed on meeting with these women and hearing about their problems in more detail.

The workshop was largely interactive with women from different groups talking about the issues they faced. As a questionnaire had been shared with the groups when they were invited, they had come prepared to discuss the issues they faced in terms of access to resources, markets, health, education, housing, violence and discrimination.

Most of the participants at the round table were in fish vending, from traditional fishing communities. For the majority of the participants, it was the first time that they were speaking in large gatherings about the problems they were facing. Though they came from different parts of the state and represented different communities and groups, there were a lot of common issues that they faced. They spoke about the threat to the livelihoods of their traditional fishing communities and the lack of protective measures. They lamented the lack of spaces in the markets and being gradually edged away from prime locations in the local markets due to other vendors. In certain areas, fish vendors from outside the municipality or *panchayat* (local administrative unit) boundaries sold their fish on the roads or any open area just outside the fish market, reducing the sale of the traditional users of the market. Within the markets, they deplored the lack of water and toilet facilities, and the lack of storage facilities. In several places, the markets were in need of repair and there were inadequate light facilities.

Another problem in recent years that the women faced was the lack of regulations of market timings. Due to the purse seiners, wholesalers arrived at the markets at different times during the day, and vendors came in

The sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women have decided to come together and self-organise.

from various parts of the state to sell fish. This resulted in huge fluctuations in prices over the day, affecting sales of the traditional users. Traditional vendors have been asking for regulations in market timings to prevent this, but to no avail.

In the capital city of Panjim, the fish market was in a disastrous condition, they said. Alongside the fish vendors were the sellers of meat products, preventing customers from coming to the fish market due to the smells. The lack of regulation of timings in the markets meant that the market was never closed long enough for it to be properly cleaned.

The government-supported mobile vans for fish vendors were also creating problems for the local vendors. The vans were given on condition that they would be parked in, or travel to, villages where there were no local markets and that they would sell fish at five per cent less than the market rate. However, these vans were parked near the town markets creating competition for the local fisherwomen with their reduced prices. Similarly, cycle vendors purchasing from wholesalers in the markets were selling door-to-door in the villages, reducing customers in the markets. This was being done without the clear permission of the *panchayats* or municipalities.

There being no clear rule about the annual *sopo* (a traditional tax collected by the municipalities/*panchayats*), different amounts were collected in the markets, either according to person, load or space occupied. Women from some remote areas were adversely affected by this when the rates were increased for no ostensible reason. The street vendors along highways or in smaller markets, faced the problems of lack of safe spaces and shelter from the wind, rain, dust on the roads.

The reduced access to fish for sale and for drying fish was experienced across the state, with women having to work longer hours, leading to health problems. They also experienced threats to their land and water resources due to tourism, construction activities, 'development projects' like casinos, and industrial fishing in Goa and neighbouring states. They pointed out the lack of political will and weak governance systems to deal with their problems. Several participants were part of communities that had complained or appealed to the authorities to protect their interests, but nothing much had been done.

Dr Smita Mazumdar, Superintendent of Fisheries, shared the few schemes available for women like provision of ice boxes, loans at low interest rates for fisheries related activities, and funds for 'construction of

fish markets'. She said that Rs. five lakhs (approximately, USD 7,500) was available under the last scheme, which was underutilized though the fisheries department had been asking the *panchayats* for their proposals. She informed the group about the requirements to access these, as well as the roles of the fisheries inspectors, surveyors and officers, and who could be approached. Women shared their concerns with her about the implementation issues with some of the schemes, as well as their problems which went far beyond welfare schemes. They were amazed to learn of a new central government scheme which would be implemented by the Goa government, where fish vendors would get Rs. 30,000 subsidy for the purchase of certain brands of motorbikes. The women were upset with this new information. In their view, the schemes would only strengthen those with cycles or who could be mobile—mainly men—further impacting the local market vendors who were already suffering due to the cycle fish vendors.

Success stories were also shared, where women were organized and their federation's demands were not ignored, when the market had to be renovated. The redeveloped market has to an extent been made in accordance with their requirements. Even so, they were facing a lot of difficulties due to the lack of storage space and shelter, and the fact that they have to pay for the use of the toilet and for water.

The fish farms in Goa are largely improved traditional ponds and are owned by families or by the *comunidade* (a form of communally-held land association) who lease out the ponds annually or for several years. Most of the farms are monoculture, and the government provides subsidies and training. A few farms are owned by women. The representatives from the fish farms at the round table spoke about the lack of support from the local administration for infrastructure for the fish farms for the economically backward sections.

Participants were informed about the SSF Guidelines, its key guiding principles and its relationship to the issues raised by the women. The importance of social auditing and monitoring of the implementation of the schemes, how the Guidelines could be used to support capacity building of women and strengthening of their associations or collectives, and how elements of the Guidelines could be used to advocate for their interests were discussed. The lack of schemes for women in fisheries in Goa pointed to the lack of recognition of women's work.

The women raised various demands in the course of the round table. They called for transparency and accountability in the design of markets and accountability at all levels.

They made a concerted demand for proper markets, and that women fish vendors be consulted in their design so that it considers their needs. They stressed the need for ice to be provided by the government for small-scale vendors. They demanded that toilets needed to be constructed and maintained in the markets and that water facilities and adequate spaces for storage be provided. They emphasized the need to regulate the timings for wholesalers and vendors in each market, and that ID cards be provided to women vendors who have traditional rights over the markets.

They demanded that fisheries inspectors ensure that there were no vendors just outside the markets and that cycle and rickshaw vendors as well as mobile vans plied in areas where there were no markets. They also demanded the formulation of regulations on where fish markets could be set up. They felt that women vendors should be entitled to pensions and social security schemes, as was being done for the motorcycle pilots in Goa. They asked that certain schemes of

the Department of Fisheries could be extended to others (for example, the schemes for rampon nets could be extended to other nets or fishing gear in the *agor/ khazan* or estuarine lands). Finally, as the capital city was being converted to a smart city, the women vendors would like to collaborate with the Fisheries Department to propose a model fish market.

Importantly, the sharing of experiences and contacts enriched the round table and the women decided to come together and self-organize to raise their concerns to the authorities, with the support of Saad Aangan. Representatives of each locality took on the responsibility to organize local meetings to raise the issues and look at the formation of associations or groups. They also decide to explore the possibility of having joint meetings at the local levels with *panchayat* authorities, women vendors and the fisheries department. A delegation would meet with the Director of Fisheries and other concerned departments shortly to formally present their demands. ❏