

# Street vendors, fish markets and food security

**While women in fisheries cope with the challenges of changing market systems, persistent gender inequities threaten to impact livelihoods and food security.**

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New research in southern India, conducted by the Fish4Food Project, reveals that small-scale traders play an important role in ensuring access to fish by the urban poor. By providing low income consumers with small pelagic fish, in particular, small-scale traders support food security as well as contribute to the livelihoods of their own households. Many of the small-scale traders serving the urban poor in southern India are women street vendors who travel on foot from door to door or sit on street corners or in roadside markets. Street vendors are ubiquitous in Asian cityscapes. Yet despite the important role they play in local economies, delivering food and other items to consumers, they enjoy few rights and legal protections, and often face harassment from police and municipal authorities. For women fish traders, these challenges are compounded by other gender-based vulnerabilities and

discrimination. Although women fish traders are not a homogenous group – their businesses operate differently based on different capital endowments, where they buy and sell fish, and volume of sales – they nevertheless face a number of common challenges. Women fish traders struggle to acquire affordable credit; they are often denied access to public transport and, in popular culture, ‘fish market’ and ‘fisherwoman’ are frequently employed derogatively as metaphors for noisy, raucous, and undesirable behaviour.

Within fish market systems, women traders often face a number of disadvantages because of the way such systems are structured and operate. Research on markets and street vendors around the world reveals that market systems and processes are deeply embedded in—and, indeed, governed by—social factors. Apart from economic considerations such as capital, assets, and scale of operation, social factors such as gender, ethnicity, caste and religious identity underlie power relations and marketplace hierarchies, and, thereby, differentially structure different traders’

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Women fish traders divide jointly purchased fish at Pangode fish market in India. Bulk landings and centralized landing sites, transportation, ice and refrigeration technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing


relationships to the market. For example, who is an insider and who is an outsider determines who has access to fish and who is allowed to sell fish in a particular marketplace. In India, men from trading communities have historically dominated city marketplaces, and women from fishing communities have had to fight for space in which to sell their fish.

Furthermore, gender norms and ideologies define women's work and their mobility in particular ways that impact how they are able to work, and what opportunities and constraints they face as economic development unfolds. Responsibility for unpaid household chores, childcare and other reproductive tasks limits the amount of time at their disposal for engagement in remunerative work, and gendered ideas about women's presence in, and movement through, public spaces limits their mobility. Because market processes are not socially neutral, if new production technology demands shifts in where and when fish is landed, and prevailing gender norms do not support women travelling to distant harbours at night, women may be shut off from sources of cheap fish. Or, if economic transactions become more commercialized, and women traders do not have access to credit because of the way they are socially situated in market hierarchies, they will be negatively impacted as will their households.

Market structures become significant when development interventions are introduced because they inform who benefits and who 'loses' from economic transformations – often in unanticipated ways. For example, if dramatic increases in production favour large-scale merchants buying in bulk over small-scale traders, the latter will be negatively impacted by economic development. In her 1981 book, *Transitional Trade and Rural Development*, Barbara Harriss-White observed: "If Development depends not only on the generation of marketed surplus [increased production] but also on its transfer and redistribution; then ... the way this surplus is utilized and redistributed is essential." Thus, the role of fish traders in development becomes a relevant question as does the analysis of the political economy of commerce in a region.

To date, fisheries science and fisheries development policy have suffered from two biases. First is the disproportionate attention to fish production, or harvesting, activities and the relative neglect of fish processing and distribution. Second is a gender bias that has overlooked or minimized women's roles in fish economies. Post-harvest activities have received

less attention than fish harvesting in fisheries development initiatives, but these activities are integrally linked to fish production. What happens in one arena dramatically impacts the other. Sixty years of planned development in India has dramatically transformed fish production systems, which, in turn, has transformed systems for the distribution and sale of fish. Planned development in India's fisheries has focused primarily on the introduction of mechanized and motorized production technology, ice and refrigeration technologies, and the construction of modern harbours. Collectively, these technologies have had two impacts. First is an increased size of individual landings. Second is a geographical shift in fish harvesting from decentralised landing sites spread out along the coast to centrally located harbours in a few key sites that can accommodate mechanized boats. Bulk landings and centralised landing sites, ice and refrigeration, along, with improved transportation technologies have, in turn, generated a new geography of fish marketing characterised by increasingly complex commodity chains, linking fish producers in local landing sites to increasingly distant markets and fish traders to new sources of fish supply. In effect, India now has a national fish market in which fish travels all over the country and is available to consumers at an affordable price virtually year-round. While this development has expanded consumer access to fish, for women small-scale fish traders, the impacts are mixed. On the one hand, they have enjoyed increased supply of fish and year-round availability, which has had a stabilising effect over what was, previously, a highly seasonal economy. On the other hand, increasingly commercialised exchange relations and stratified market systems have emerged in which large-scale merchants and commission agents dominate – to the potential detriment of small-scale traders. Although women fish traders have demonstrated creative and entrepreneurial acumen in forging strategies to cope with the challenges of changing market systems, the neglect of post-harvest activities and the exclusion of women from fisheries research priorities and policy have created gender inequities, which could over the long run adversely impact the food security of the urban poor who depend on women small-scale traders to deliver affordable fish.

To read more about the Fish4Food project, see: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/24/26624.html> and <http://knowledge4food.net/research-project/gcp3-fish4food-india-ghana/> 

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