

From child bride and adolescent mother to community leader, the journey of 48-year-old TapasiDolui, President of the women's wing of DakshinbangaMatysajibi Forum (DMF), a registered trade union of fisherfolk in West Bengal, India, though daunting and full of challenge, is an inspiration to women everywhere.

When she turned 13, TapasiDolui was married off to a fisherman in the village of Tangrachar in Kulpi Block, South 24 Parganas District in West Bengal. Everyday thereafter, she accompanied her husband on a small boat, helping him catch fish in the nearby river. Soon she also became mother to two sons. However, Tapasi's life was full of hardship, with

TapasiDolui has emerged as an active community leader, working closely with the DMF which, since 2015, has functioned as a registered trade union body of fisherfolk in West Bengal. She is the President of DMF's women's wing, and leads campaigns and protests in support of the rights of fisherwomen.

The current struggle of the community is for official biometric cards. This is a very important document, which establishes the work identity of a fisher, entitling her to government schemes and subsidies. Historically, women have found it extremely challenging to obtain this card since fishing is traditionally regarded as a male activity.

TapasiDolui recalls the battle she had to go through to obtain her biometric card: "I submitted the application for the card at the anchal (local) office, but for months after that, despite constant follow up on my part, nothing moved. Then, following the advice of Milan Das, the Treasurer of DMF, I decided to directly approach the office of the Assistant Director of Fisheries (Marine), or ADF(M). I related my story to the officials there and told them that I would not leave the office without my biometric card. Luckily, the office of the ADF(M) was sympathetic to my appeal and the card was issued to me. I am now mobilising the community on this issue. Three hundred fishers have joined the struggle and we are collectively raising our voice for our recognition, for our identities, for the protection of our rights to life and livelihood, and protesting against the various types of unlawful activities that have overtaken our coasts in recent times."

Tapasi's main objective now is to increase DMF's membership base. As many as 280 fishers have received the biometric card under her leadership. She is proving to be a catalyst in the lives of the fisherfolk of Tangrachar area. Her work is leading to the empowerment of fisherwomen belonging not just to Tangrachar but also the blocks of Shyampukur I and II, Kakdwip, and Howrah in West Bengal. These are all marginalized women, unheard by society around them, and by the planners and policy makers of our country.

Truly, Tapasi has emerged as the voice of the voiceless. ❏

PROFILE

TapasiDolui: Fisherwoman from West Bengal, India Leading the struggle of fisherwomen in Tangrachar

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TapasiDolui

poverty and deprivation, and very little support from her husband.

These hardships, far from crushing Tapasi's spirit, bestowed her with a growing resolve to become independent and to fend for herself and her two sons. She joined a local self help group. Then, with the help of a loan from the group, another loan from a local bank, and money gained from selling off her jewellery and some assets, Tapasi purchased a single-cylinder motorised boat and ten acres of land. Next, she set about training her sons to use the boat. Today, the two boys are adept fishermen and support themselves through fishing.

In December 2017, wishing to help other women stuck in disempowering situations just as she once was, Tapasi decided to form a local fisher cooperative. The cooperative, TangracharMatsyajibiSamabaySamity, now has 36 members – 16 female and 20 male – and meets regularly once a month. With the hard work and enthusiasm of its members, the cooperative has helped to transform and empower the lives of many marginalised and deprived women.