

Asia/ Sri Lanka

Valuing women's labour

Women in the fisheries sector in Sri Lanka find it increasingly difficult to compete with recent developments and modern technology

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At an international conference in 1995, the guest speaker happened to ask a question of the males present in the audience: "How many of your wives are employed?" Only a few replied in the positive. The second question was "How many of you have a domestic aid?" At this juncture, most of the men felt embarrassed to say that it was their wives who attended to the domestic chores. The real situation was analyzed at this point: women's labour in Sri Lanka is underestimated.

No consideration is given whatsoever to the labour of housewives who have to attend to all the household chores. Apart from that, there are disparities in income in some fields of employment, for example, in the estate sector, garment manufacturing and in manual labour.

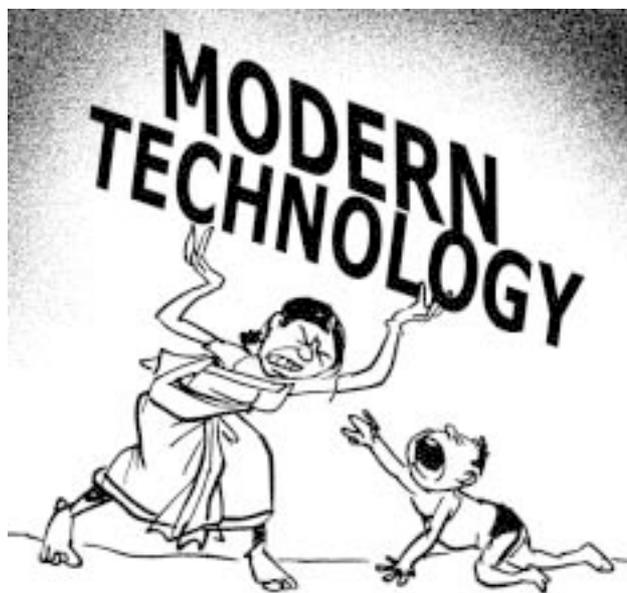
In fisheries, it would be true to say that women labour in the fisheries yesterday, today and tomorrow. In the past, fishermen and their wives worked together. They used simple methods like cast-nets, hooks-and-line and cages, and simple traditional boats such as the *theppam* and *vallam*, without engines. All household chores such as processing and selling the fish were done in close co-operation.

Women's labour, at that time, was highly valued. This was the case despite the fact that, in the south, women were not allowed to fish due to the myth that they were impure.

The situation today is entirely different due to larger social and economic changes. Globalization processes, combined with advanced technology, make it possible to utilize resources for maximum profit, through the use of efficient boats and gear. These processes simultaneously lead to the underestimation of the labour of women, who primarily use traditional technologies.

As people from outside the community enter the fishery, fisherwomen and fishermen are negatively affected. Increasingly, they become employees under these new traders, receiving payments on a daily or monthly basis. Today, women are often no longer, directly or indirectly, part of this industry. As earnings decline, they seek some form of self-employment, such as in the coir industry, weaving mats, and so on.

At the same time, the high prices of fish make it difficult for women to access them to earn an income through fish processing—preparing maldivian fish, dry fish and *jaadi*. Consumers today are more accustomed to purchasing imported forms of dry fish, maldivian fish and canned fish.



Like most other women in our society, women in the fisher community too struggle hard to exist. They have to shoulder all the problems of the family. The situation is further aggravated by government policies inviting foreign vessels to fish in our seas. At this rate, it will not be long before our fish is truly endangered.

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