

Asia/ India

Public Hearing

Women workers in Kerala highlight how globalization processes affect them

By Nalini Nayak, working with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Kerala, and also a member of ICSF

At the end of September 2001 the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Kerala organized a Public Hearing on "The Impact of Globalization on Women Workers in Kerala". This was one of several hearings organized by the National Commission for Women, Delhi, in an effort to understand, at first hand, the problems women workers face in different sectors of the economy and eventually to make necessary policy recommendations to the Central Government

SEWA, Kerala is concerned about the numerous suicides and hunger deaths reported in the media. These deaths have occurred mainly in the plantation and small farm sectors in Kerala, partly as a result of recent import-export policies that have caused a massive drop in prices, dragging small farmers into a debt trap and leaving them with little alternative to surrendering their lands to the banks.

Kerala's economy is based on its agricultural and traditional sectors like coir-making, cashew-shelling, fishing, transformation of forest produce etc. Most of these sectors are in turmoil as a result of the New Economic Policy, the Structural Adjustment Programmes and the WTO-induced import-export policies. The majority of workers in these sectors are women.

There were women from four sectors that testified at this Hearing—from the plantation, farm and fish processing sectors and from the Cochin Special Export Processing Zone. I will report here only on what the women in the fish processing sector had to say.

The ICSF Women in Fisheries Programme, through the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF), had, in 1996, conducted a Hearing on the problems of migrant women workers in fish processing plants in India. At that time, a majority of such migrant workers were from Kerala and worked under sub-human conditions in processing plants in distant areas. These plants undertook the entire gamut of processing activities from procurement of shrimp to freezing, canning and

export, and were not regulated.

Under pressure to regularize the sector, several of them have subsequently adopted the casualization and 'putting out' policy. This means that they try to subcontract as many of the processes as possible, in this case, the actual peeling of the shrimp. Over the years there has been a rise in the number of shrimp peeling sheds in Kerala where merchants with relatively small investments set up a shed, purchase shrimp in bulk and hire women to clean the shrimp. These merchants then sell the cleaned shrimp to processing plants.

This is what Sreedevi says about the way these sheds operate: "I have been cleaning shrimp ever since I was 12 years old as I needed money for the family and for my studies. I had to stop my education when I completed 8th standard and I went full time into cleaning shrimp. At that time we went to the landing centre, sorted the catches and did some cleaning there itself. But about 10 years ago these sheds came up in our village itself, as work in coir processing declined. Over the years the sheds have grown bigger. The owners keep changing either because they have made enough money and want to move on, or because they are incurring losses. We women just keep working. We are paid on a piece rate basis and receive no other benefits. Our present owner, who has been here for the past few years, used to give us 10kg of rice at festival time but this year gave us only Rs50 (approximately US\$1.1) as a kind of bonus."



“For cleaning a basin meant to contain 1.5 kg of shrimp—generally it is much more—we are paid Rs3. So on an average we can make Rs30 to 40 (less than one US\$) a day. We work in permanently damp conditions, sitting in rows on our haunches. We do not use any gloves or boots. When there are bulk landings we work for 12-14 hours non-stop and there are several occasions when our fingers bleed but as they are so numb we do not feel the pain until we go home at night. I generally soak my hands in a hot decoction of tea. This helps me to go back to work the next day. I need the work as my husband is only a casual worker and we have no other means of livelihood. When my child was born, I stopped work for a few months and then my mother helped to care for the child. But there are several women who bring their babies to the work sheds and hang them in cradles outside so they can feed them when required.”

“Over the years we have created our own union to represent our case to the government. Not only do we lack any kind of job security and workers benefits, we are not even considered as workers by the Fisherman’s Welfare Board. We waged a long struggle last year and the Labour Officer—a woman—intervened. She made a good report about our actual working conditions, making a case for punitive action. But, rather than taking action based on her report, she was transferred. It became clear that the owners of peeling sheds are better organized than we are and certainly have more political clout. We know that Kerala claims to be a progressive state where labour rights are concerned. However, the reality in our case is the opposite. There are thousands of women like me working in the hundreds of peeling sheds in my district. These peeling shed also cause considerable pollution as they dispose of the contaminated water in common water bodies, leading to the spread of disease.”

“This year shrimp catches have fallen and several peeling sheds have closed down. We also hear that consignments of shrimp exported last year were returned to India as they did not pass the sanitary standards of the importing country. The owners try everything possible to maximize their profits but, in the end, it is at our expense.”

Sreedevi’s account sums up the problem in the processing industry quite lucidly. More and more women are being employed on a daily wage basis with no workers benefits or job security. Labour laws are

being modified to suit the new labour practices that favour the casualization of labour. All this will further facilitate the movement of work from northern countries to the south where labour standards will be flouted at all levels.

Nalini can be contacted at nalinin@md5.vsnl.net.in