

In One Voice

A public hearing of women fishworkers in the south Indian state of Kerala was held in the capital, Thiruvananthapuram, on 16 February 2016

The women fishworkers in the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Kerala, India, have, for several years now, been complaining that life is getting increasingly difficult for them. While some of their issues are being taken up by the union, they still complain of the difficulty of surviving amidst increasing competition of all kinds and how the growing numbers of male vendors and male domination in markets were making life a daily struggle. SEWA then undertook a more detailed study of the vendors, their access to fish, and the issues they faced in the market.

The study revealed that there have been significant changes in the sector over the past six to seven years, and these have had a tremendous bearing not only on the work of women in the fisheries but also on the quality of fish that is reaching the market. The findings of the study were discussed in depth with the women in February 2015. The women highlighted the two major problems as (i) growing male domination in fish vending and in the markets, and (ii) competition from poor-quality frozen fish that prevented fresh fish from fetching its rightful price.

While both the women who sell fresh fish and those who sell frozen fish were present at these discussions, they all seemed to understand that they are together victims of similar processes of change taking place in fishing itself. As the boats get bigger and more capital-intensive, landings have become more centralized. Fish is frozen during long voyages and dumped in harbours. This fish then travels back to the seashore for sale to women vendors in the fishing communities, as the catches in the

small-scale fisheries sector have also been diminishing due to the large catches out at sea. The women who sell frozen fish said: "This is the only way we get fish for sale but we know it is not of good quality. Moreover, consumers do not have much money to buy, so they purchase this bad-quality fish".

In such discussions, women understood that this is the case with all food. Even vegetables today are of bad quality and so there are now organic shops where people can buy good-quality vegetables even if for a slightly higher price. Would they be willing to sit in separate markets so

that consumers could have the choice to buy either fresh or frozen fish? Although they could not fathom this in the beginning, the women gradually began to understand and wondered how they could work towards such a process. They realized that they would have to reach a consensus among themselves and be willing to speak in one voice to convince the authorities and the consumers.

Public hearing

Hence it was decided to organize a 'Public Hearing' to ensure better publicity for the issue, after which negotiations could be undertaken at different levels to move towards greater food safety and decent working conditions for women. But

This article is by **Nalini Nayak** (nalini.nayak@gmail.com), Member, ICSF

this would be a long struggle and would women be willing to give the time for it? Several women were willing to put in the effort for this. They agreed to come for regular meetings, develop arguments and then prepare their testimonies to be ably communicated to the jury.

While it is normally very difficult to get women to free themselves for such activities, a group of around 20 women kept coming for the meetings on a regular basis for around nine Sundays over five months. They had to first understand what a public hearing is. Then they had to understand the logic and connection between the issues they were going to communicate, and afterwards think of alternatives. They also had to choose who would speak on which topic, and prepare themselves accordingly.

SEWA managed to get together an interesting jury for the public hearing, comprising the chairman of the Famine-cum-Relief Fisheries Welfare Fund who is a retired High Court judge, the Director of Fisheries, the Commissioner of Food Safety, the Chief Executive Officer of Matsyafed (the state fisheries co-operative federation), the Chairman of the Fisheries Development Corporation, the Chairperson of the Head Load Workers Welfare Board, a senior woman scientist from the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, and an activist on fisheries and coastal issues.

At the hearing, Sonia, the secretary of SEWA Kerala, introduced the reason for conducting the hearing. She said that there are over 50,000 women in small-scale fisheries, mainly in three coastal districts in Kerala—Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Kasargod—and they face numerous issues in earning their livelihood. The hearing would only raise issues of the women who directly engage in fish vending. Subsequently, the women began with their testimonies.

Philomi spoke about the traditional knowledge of the small-scale fishers and how they managed to bring back large catches without any so-called

‘modern’ equipment, and how the communities lived off these resources. She said that this is due to the knowledge accumulated over generations of both the fishers and the women who sell, salt and dry fish. This knowledge is the source of livelihood for thousands of coastal people and since it is based on the rhythms of nature, it is also sustainable. This knowledge should be protected.

Mercy, a young woman, spoke about the debt she had fallen into as her husband tried to keep abreast of the new methods of catching fish with outboard engines, global positioning system (GPS), larger nets and powerful lights. As new equipment is introduced every week, all the fishers think they have to buy it. Mercy said they had borrowed Rs 3 lakhs (US\$ 4500) five years ago and now had a debt of Rs 10 lakhs (US\$ 15000). Their entire catch seems to go to the companies who produce the technology and the oil to run the engines. They are left in debt as they ended up fishing not to sustain themselves but to sustain the companies. “Why does the government not control this”, Mercy wondered.

Punitha, Carmel, Mary Varghese and Jaya then spoke of the problems they had in accessing fish. Punitha, who only procures fresh fish, spoke about the burden of travelling to different shores, starting in the wee hours of the morning, to get fresh fish after bearing the high transport costs. Carmel spoke about the competition at the Kollam harbor to buy fish at the auctions. Mary narrated how they are cheated on weights and quality by the wholesale merchants at the markets. Jaya spoke about the bad-quality frozen fish that comes to their seashore in insulated vans from distant harbours, and how they are cheated by the merchants again. They have no idea how old the fish is, but it is much cheaper than the locally caught fish, whose prices are thus driven down.

Reaching the market is another ordeal. Stella spoke about the problems she has had getting into

the state transport buses as they are not allowed to travel in them, and the bus conductors treat them very badly. She shared her painful experience of being literally thrown out of the bus with her container. Achamma spoke about the Matsyafed bus that takes them to the harbour at Kollam and brings them back to the market, which is a great service, but that there are only four such buses in the state. Kochu Thresia spoke about the costs of hiring private vehicles, which drains them of all their earnings. She demanded that Matsyafed provide a bus exclusively for the over 100 women vendors from her village.

Worse are the experiences of women in the market itself. Selvarani, Silvamma and Punitha spoke about the extortionist headload workers who demand large sums just to take out the fish baskets from the autorickshaws at the market and then demand festival allowances as well. There are other problems as well—high market taxes, lack of running water and toilets even in refurbished markets, lack of space for consumers, slippery tiled floors that dissuade consumers from venturing in, among others. They spoke about the poor drainage for water runoff. All the prime spots are occupied by male merchants who were earlier absent. Finally, Annamary, who had put up a big fight at the market where she sells fish, explained in detail how they, the members of SEWA, who had managed to get the *panchayat* to refurbish the market, were forced to sit out in the sun. When the *panchayat* finally did construct the market, the women were not allotted spaces to sit under the shelters—these were occupied by the men. This is because the municipal market is auctioned and the man who bid for it has been in control for decades. He makes the rules and treats the women with disrespect. He has now also become a big merchant of frozen fish himself and has engaged male vendors to sell the fish for him. These men do not pay any tax and they occupy the prime spots in the market. Shusheela and

Merina, women from Kollam, had similar stories to tell.

Alphonsa and Vimala spoke about the fate of the women who sell dry fish. They explained that the only fish they get to dry these days comes from the vehicles that bring frozen fish. Since this fish is of bad quality, disguised with ammonia or formalin, it has no shelf life even when it is dried. Hence they have to dispose of it fast and the price they get is very low. Moreover, they have to go to distant markets to sell the fish, to areas where no other fish reach.

To wind up, Amala spoke about the living conditions of the fishing community. In many areas there is no access to potable water and women have to buy water. There are no drainage and sanitation facilities, and many areas are water-logged, posing a major health hazard. Several villages face threats of coastal erosion, and houses are damaged during the rains. This is caused by the stone retention walls that are being built all along the coast, which is no way to save the coast from erosion. Amala claimed that the sea receives all the pollution from inland sources and nobody cares about the lives of the people who live on the coast.

Sita, who compered the hearing, wound it up by saying that the policy for modernizing the fishery had led to these effects on people's work and food, and that the government, while only thinking of increasing the fish catch through modernizing, does not pay heed to these aspects. This has led to a greater masculinization of the fishery, and the women bear the brunt of it. Hence it is important for the local and state governments to find ways to solve these issues to ensure that the fisherwomen get their legitimate rights to a decent livelihood.

After listening attentively, the jury gave its responses, which are summarized below:

- Maintaining the quality of fish is an important aspect of food safety. The Department of Food Safety will train fisherwomen in aspects of quality management. Such experiments are presently

being undertaken in north Kerala and the same can be adopted in Thiruvananthapuram as well. This must eventually be conducted through the entire value chain.

- If and when women are trained, means of branding the high-quality fish can also be undertaken.
- Women-only markets selling only good-quality fish should be developed in other districts to facilitate the process of informing the consumers of good-quality fish, so that the small-scale fishers also get better prices.
- Markets are developed by the Fisheries Department/Fisheries Corporation and handed over to the Municipal Corporation or local bodies. In future, criteria will be developed when handing over markets to local bodies so that the rights of women vendors are safeguarded, and maintaining infrastructure of sanitation, lighting and waste disposal will be made mandatory.
- Discussions should be held between the women vendors and the headload workers through their representative organizations, in which the Headload Workers Welfare Board will proactively help, to see that charges are made only as per rules and to sort out other disputes and reduce the harassment of the women.
- As the market is their workplace, any harassment of women should be dealt with according to the Harassment at the Workplace Act.
- While Matsyafed still runs a few buses for women vendors at great cost, efforts will be made to introduce buses on routes that will be viable, particularly from the Adimalathura area towards Neyyatinkara.
- All women should actively participate in *gram sabhas* so that they can demand their rights from the local government and stand united against the marginalization and harassment they now face.
- More comprehensive data is required regarding women who work in different aspects of fisheries. The Fisheries Department

should be able to find ways of collecting more authentic data so that planning and budgeting for this sector becomes more meaningful.

- Presently, there is a mismatch between the loan schemes of the various departments and the needs of the women. Efforts will be made to develop, in collaboration with SEWA, some creative participatory alternatives that can be of more beneficial to the women.
- All technical institutions should reach out more to women's groups to develop their capacities in financial management and quality control. Financial support through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) could also be sought for this.
- More attention should be given to the implementation of the Street Vendors Act so that the street vendors are not arbitrarily evicted and also to ensure that the various requirements of the Act—portable shelters, access to public toilets and water, garbage clearance—are also put in place, thereby serving both the vendors and the public. 3

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