

WOMEN IN FISHERIES

Editors

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Introduction

The fishing community is almost solely dependent on the sea resources for their livelihood (Krishna Srinath, 1987) and the roles that a fisherwoman plays are integral for the maintenance of the family. With intensification of the fishing effort and the decrease in production per unit resulted in fluctuations in the income of fishermen. The significance of employment of fisherwomen is paramount for the sustenance of fisher families. The woman's role has traditionally been shore-based, post-harvest activities including auctioning, marketing, pre-processing and processing (Anbarasan Karuna, 1985). Marginalisation of these traditional roles has been observed with increasing mechanisation of fishing operations and large volume of fish being landed, increase in the money transactions and the basic landing centre activities such as auctioning, wholesale and retail purchase etc. passing into the hands of men. With almost all activities of post-harvest fisheries becoming capital-intensive women have been placed at a disadvantage since their access to resources, particularly capital, is poor, affecting their capacity to invest as well. They are no longer able to purchase the necessary fresh fish for marketing or processing (DFID-PHFP, 1998). They have little or no access to institutionalised credit, chiefly due to their own ignorance or reluctance to approach credit institutions.

Credit institutions, particularly those in the cooperative sector, thus have an important role to perform in empowering fisherwomen. A study was undertaken to review the working of fish marketing systems in Vaddy-Thangasherri region of Kerala.

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Role of MATSYAFED

MATSYAFED, a Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries Development Ltd. is an agency under the State Department of Fisheries, has been financing women in fish vending since 1989, through the Vaddy-Thangasherri Fishermen Development Welfare Cooperative Society, Vaddy. The credit extended by the agency is Rs. 3000 with Rs. 300 as the beneficiary contribution. A 22.5 % subsidy was provided in this scheme. The loan had to be repaid within three years at an interest of 12 %. The women fish vendors purchase the containers, which are usually made of aluminum for keeping the fish and the raw material, ice etc. So far 600 women have been financed under this scheme. Data collected from 35 women respondents has been used for this study.

Family and Work profile

The fisher families in the Vaddy-Thangasherri region belong to the Christian community. The average age of the respondents was 49. Most of the respondents have been in the trade for several years. The average family size is six and an average of three members including the respondent, are engaged in some form of employment or other. Most of the male members are involved in fishing or allied activities.

The respondents are engaged in fish marketing for six days a week and take a break on Sunday. Important festive occasions are also non-work days. The respondents are all involved in fish based work and when not marketing, engage in other post harvest activities like salting and drying. The dry fish is generally marketed by the agents.

The respondents purchase fish for marketing from Vaddy-Thangasherri landing centre lying within a range of 0.5 to 2 km from their residences. Usually the women purchase one head load of fish that caters to the popular taste of their regular customers. The type of fish purchased also depends on the fish landed at

the landing centre. The most common species preferred are sardine, mackerel, seer, prawns etc. The women buy fish from wholesalers or form groups and directly bid during auction.

Seventy one per cent of the respondents are engaged in door-to-door marketing of fish. Only 29% of women vendors sell their fish in nearby markets. Sixty six per cent of the respondents reach their area of operation on foot and the rest use either public transport or a group of women hire an auto, the fare being shared, to reach a common point from where they disperse to their respective areas. When marketing is done door-to-door, the women cover an average of 36 houses every day. The respondents spent an average of 8 hours in the whole marketing process, from the purchase to the sale of fish.

Economics

MATSYAFED financed the initial requirements of the trade - the container to carry the fish and the raw material. It has also given the much needed impetus for the women to remain in the trade. The repayment capacity of the fisherwomen is high with all the respondents having repaid the loan within the stipulated period and no defaults being reported.

The respondents earned an average profit of Rs 44 per day. Profits in general ranged from Rs 40 to Rs 50. The profits accruing to the fish vendors were high when the day-to-day investment was high or when the fish purchased had high value like seer etc. The average family income per month was Rs. 2588 and that of the respondents Rs. 1063. The average percentage contribution of the respondents to the family income was 41 per cent. Two of the respondents were the only earning members in their family.

The auction agent also finances the daily purchase of fish. It is an informal arrangement with the loan being repaid the next day after the fish is sold. It usually draws an interest of 10%. Ninety one per cent of the respondents are dependent on this form of credit. An average expenditure of Rs 500 is incurred per day for fish and ice.

Problems faced

The women engaged in door-to-door fish marketing have to spend long hours on foot with head loads while the women in retail markets are forced to remain in a squatting position. This affects the general health of the women. Most of the respondents complained of pain in the legs, head and lower back. The infrastructural facilities in markets are generally poor and this adds to the inconvenience of the market vendors. They are also facing increasing competition from cycle vendors who have the advantage of greater mobility. However, the women form an important link in the marketing chain carrying the fish to the doorsteps of the consumer (Nikita Gopal *et al.*, 2000).

Though the respondents availed the benefit of an institutionalized credit scheme to begin the venture, their day-to-day business is still financed by loans from the informal sector. Only 9 % of the respondents have been able to re-invest their profits into the marketing process. The household situation does not permit the fisher families in developing a saving habit, since the incomes that the menfolk bring in are not regular or fixed.

Conclusion

The loan scheme by MATSYAFED has helped the fisherwomen from Vaddy-Thangasherri region to take up marketing of fish as a means of supplementing the family income in the face of fluctuating incomes of their menfolk from fishing. However, a majority of women are still dependent on the informal credit sector for financing their daily transactions. Therefore, there is a

need to develop a better alternative to cater to this need. (The women can be organized into self-help groups to encourage the saving habit and to develop a corpus fund that can be used to meet their immediate financial requirements. Synergy is needed between credit, savings and marketing issues for the venture to be economically viable and sustainable (PHF News, 1997). (Financial security and independence is often the first step towards empowerment of any section of society.

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