

WOMEN IN FISHERIES

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Empowering Fisherwomen

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In this paper the authors trace the reasons for the marginalisation of fisherwomen in India in spite of their important role in post-harvest operations and in net making. Unfortunately most development programmes have been of little benefit. For their emancipation, the authors point out that fisherwomen first need to be empowered with a positive self image and decision making capabilities. This paper sketches a profile of fisherwomen of the country and deals with the concept of empowerment.

The Indian Fisherwoman - A Profile

In India, in the marine sector alone fisherwomen number about 11 lakh, inhabiting about 2500 coastal villages (CMFRI 1980). The common feature among these women throughout the country is the hardship, mainly economic in nature, that they face. Even such of these fisherwomen who are fortunate to be engaged in some economic activity generally face a host of problems. For example, there is little protection of wages or employment, as small-scale fisheries are usually managed based on unwritten rules. The perishable nature of fish, poor and costly transport facilities which do not permit them to buy fish directly from the landing centres, and competition from the organised sector add to the problems of the fisherwoman.

The annual income of a typical fishing household in India ranges from Rs. 2500 to 3500 of which 80 per cent is spent on food. Earnings are determined by type of fishing, access to markets, existence of supplementary sources of income and extent of indebtedness. The fishing villages are often remote and inaccessible, and with unproductive lands that are also subject to sea erosion. Housing is inadequate. Basic facilities such as hygienic drinking water and health services are often lacking. Since women-folk usually bear the brunt of these deprivations, fisherwomen have lately received much attention in developing countries and among international agencies supporting development efforts.

A detailed profile of the Indian fisherwoman is given below:

- a) **Demographic indicators:** The 1981 census shows a sex ratio of 933 females to 1000 males in the general population of the country. Kerala is the only state where the ratio is in favour of females. However, even in Kerala, the sex ratio is balanced in favour of males in the case of fisher folk, with a ratio of 972 females (marine sector) and 956 females (inland) to 1000 males (Anon., 1982). These imbalances can be attributed in some measure to the indifference towards women's health.
- b) **Literacy:** A good index of human resource development is the female literacy rate in rural areas. According to the 1981 census the literacy rate was 17 per cent and 47 per cent for rural and urban women respectively. Among fisher folk, the literacy levels of the women is even lower (Anon., 1982; Anon., 1987).
- c) **Employment status:** Along with being engaged in household chores from dawn to dusk, fisherwomen play an important role in retailing, auctioning, curing and drying, prawn peeling and collection of seaweed, apart from hand-braiding and repair of nets. Nevertheless, they suffer from a high degree of casualisation and marginalisation. It is estimated that even during the fishing season only about 25 percent of the women obtain a regular income of about Rs.60 per week after working for six hours per day (Srinath 1986; Anon., 1987). Development programmes have unfortunately had little impact as they either were not meant specifically for the fisherwoman or they required her to be credit-worthy.
- d) **Health:** Nutrition is a crucial factor determining health. Fisher folk in India generally suffer from malnutrition and dietary imbalances. Cereals and fish comprise the major portion of the diet, and hence only 75 per cent of the calorie and 50 per cent of the protein needs are met (Srinath, 1987). Commonly seen disorders are malnutrition and vitamin A and B complex deficiency (Devadas and Nirmala Murty, 1979) apart from ailments like gastroenteritis and allergic bronchitis. Women are the worst affected and this is reflected by the imbalance in the sex ratio and their lower life expectancy.
- e) **Impact of technology:** While the introduction of mechanisation in the fishing industry seems to have benefited fisherwomen in some areas, as reported by Gulati (1979), it has had an adverse effect in many other parts of the country. For example, the introduction of mechanised fishing in Vypeen Island (Srinath, 1986) and the introduction of automation in net making (Vivekanandan, 1988) have reduced employment opportunities for fisherwomen considerably.

Concept of Empowerment

The word 'power' derives from Latin and means 'to be able'. 'Empower' in turn, means to render a person able by giving power, strength or competence. In the particular context of our analysis, the word refers to enabling the fisherwoman to exercise her right to lead a happy life. It does not mean educating a handful of women and rewarding them with administrative positions in developmental programmes.

It means preparing every woman to actively participate in the decision making process for a better livelihood. Empowerment is an active multidimensional process which should enable individuals to realize their full potential in all spheres of life. This power has to be acquired, sustained and exercised.

The average Indian fishing family today finds it difficult to earn a livelihood throughout the year. Therefore, the vast potential available among the unemployed fisherwomen needs to be tapped, which can be done by making them capable of

doing something remunerative on their own. This, however, requires that the women are motivated, have a degree of awareness, the ability to think critically and take decisions, and above all possess a measure of self esteem. These are some of the parameters of empowerment, and education the surest means to it, as spelled out in the Programme of Action for the National Education Policy, 1986.

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