

Struggling with Hope

The Story of Women Fish Vendors of South Kerala

by
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IT is early dawn. On hearing the church bells, Mary awakes. Paul, her husband, and the children are fast asleep.

As she slowly walks to the thatched hut, her thoughts race to the numerous tasks awaiting her. She makes the coffee and wakes up Paul as he has to go fishing. She prepares *pan* for him. Paul takes the net and joins the others at the beach.

Mary stands on the beach until the boat disappears on the horizon. She murmurs a silent prayer for their safety and for a good catch. On hearing her name called out, she looks back to see her mother, Rita, calling from the nearby hut where she stays with Mary's widowed sister, Rosa, and her children. Rita reminds Mary to hurry up if she is to reach the market early. The previous day Mary was a bit late and iced fish had already arrived in the market. The fish Mary carried from the beach was costlier and could not sell all of it that day.

Mary swiftly cleans the hut, and awakens her elder daughter, Rosalie, who is barely 12, but is in charge of the three younger children. She has dropped out of school after class three in order to stay at home and took after the younger children when parents are away. While getting ready to go to the market, Mary instructs Rosalie to cook rice before her father returns. She distributes 50 paise each to the children to buy *puttu* from the nearby teashop for breakfast.

Mary takes the basket and walks to her mother's hut. She asks her mother to take Rosalie with her to the

shop when she goes to buy rice and tapioca. She also requests her mother to spread the fish which she had been unable to sell the previous day to dry in the sun and also to keep an eye on the children. She tells her that she plans to go to the harbour as there may not be much fish that day on their beach. Chewing *pan*, which she takes from her mother's pouch, Mary walks swiftly to catch the bus to the harbour.

Mary soon joins the other women vendors waiting on the beach for the boats to return. Soon her friend, Lily, spots her and volunteers the information that the boats which set out early have started to come back, and the catch looks good. But the owners prefer to auction the catch to the wholesale merchants who have ready cash, and not to the women vendors.

Looking around, Mary sees anxious and disappointed faces of women with empty baskets. When two catamarans landed, a few women rushed to them, but the small catch of fish is only enough to fill the basket of one woman, who makes the highest bid. The wail continues; so too the anxiety. The merchants have started to take their fish to the market on cycles and lorries. There is no point in waiting further. A few women decide to pool their money, buy some fish and divide it among themselves. As Mary had not sold all her fish the previous day, her share is small. She only gets some anchovies.

It is already 9 a.m. Mary starts the long walk to the market, almost running. She must reach there before

10 a.m. to sell in the morning market.

Mary feels exhausted by the time everything is sold. It is already noon and she has not eaten anything. She goes to the nearby teashop to have a cup of tea and two *apams*. The market tax collector, who allowed Mary to enter on her promise that she would pay after the sales, comes to collect the market tax. Since there is no point in arguing with him, Mary gives him Rs 3, although the prescribed rate on the board is only 50 paise per headload.

It is well past 4 p.m. before Mary reaches home. On the way she buys the necessary provisions for the next day and some firewood. She has some bananas for the children who come running to meet her. Her mother is gathering up the dry fish from the sand, Rosalie brings her some rice gruel. After drinking it, Mary goes to the common well to have a bath. There is a big rush there and Mary has no time to wait, so she manages with the two buckets of water she can get and rushes back home. Her legs and back are aching and she sits down to calculate her expenses and to stretch her aching legs. After the bus fare, the food, market tax, offering at the church, and cost of provisions, very little is left. She still has to pay the interest on the loan and needs money to buy fish tomorrow. If Paul is lucky at sea, he may bring some cash. But Rosalie tells her that Paul has already returned, and after eating, has gone to play cards. Mary knows that he will come back only after visiting the liquor shop with his friends. She



exclaims loudly: “Who knows how much will be left after the card game and the liquor?”. Rita admonishes her to keep quiet to escape being beaten by him.

Mary starts to help Rosalie prepare the evening meal. She cleans the fish she has brought back. The children have to be fed, and they have to attend prayers at the shrine nearby. She must wait till Paul arrives.

The story of Mary is the story of thousands of fish vending women of south Kerala. Hours of hard work from the young age of between 10 and 12 until they die; constant childbearing, harassment by husbands who are often alcoholics: and perpetual indebtedness. Their work is always undervalued; they face discrimination in the family and society. Their life is one long and painful struggle.

The process of so-called development in fisheries has not in any way improved the situation of women in the fishing communities: rather, it has worsened their already weak position. Development in fisheries was aimed at increasing

productivity by resorting to technological upgradation borrowed from the West. Those who benefited from the process were not the artisanal fishworkers who depended entirely on fishing for their survival, but those who could mobilise capital to buy costly boats and gear.

The destructive methods used in the fishing increased production for some time, but slowly fish resources began showing signs of depletion. Those who were hardest hit by resource depletion were the artisanal fishworkers. The entire process also overburdened women whose meagre income contributed substantially to the family’s sustenance. When production was centralised small traders, especially women, were marginalised. When the income of men became unstable, the women had to work harder to meet the survival needs of the family. If fish was not available locally for sale, they had to travel to far off places where they would get fish for vending.

Fishing is a very hazardous occupation, and death at sea is not

uncommon. Often, the entire burden of looking after the family falls on the widowed woman. The number of female headed households in the coastal area is fairly high.

It is often argued that productivity can lead to women’s emancipation, but in the context of landless and assetless people like the fisherfolk: economic productivity of the woman also means a greater burden for her. It is women who spend almost all their income on the survival needs of the family, whereas hardly 60 percent of the income of men comes to the family. If they are alcoholics, this percentage is further reduced. If the women are earning, the burden of taking loans in times of crisis and repaying these also becomes theirs.

The system of matrilocality exists among the Christian fisherfolk of south Kerala. If the family owns a little land, this too is inherited by the girls. The man, after marriage, resides in his wife’s village and operates the fishing equipment of her family. This system definitely has certain advantages—the woman is not harassed by her in-

laws and she is supported by her maternal relatives in times of need. But surprisingly enough, this system does not dramatically improve her social position. The family and the community approves the man's right over the woman. She has to be submissive to him. When she handles the income she has to give him money to drink. She may get beaten up when he is drunk, but that is seen as his right and as a purely personal matter between husband and wife. Women are excluded from decision making processes in the family, in the church and in the community.

When the burden of combining their roles in the process of production and in the family becomes too great for the women to carry, part of the burden is shifted to the girl children of the family. They drop out from school to assist the mother and the vicious cycle of illiteracy, ill health and poverty starts. The sense of inferiority is reinforced by the widening of the gap between men and women in access to knowledge, opportunities of participation in the decision making process and in exercising power in any way.

In spite of all this, there is a ray of hope. Because of the integral role women play in marketing, they have certain advantages. They have relatively greater mobility and are exposed to a greater variety of societal experiences than women of many other communities. Hence, they are more open to new ideas and stimuli.

The last few years of struggle by fisher workers have shown that women are the most militant and vociferous in demanding conservation of marine resources. They have been active in demanding transport facilities to go to market; they have struggled against unjust market taxes and atrocities on women. They are waging constant struggles against alcoholism among the men of their community. In this process their consciousness as women and as workers continues to develop. □