

4 Women Workers in the Seafood Processing Sector of Kerala, India - Structural Changes Due to Migration

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Abstract

Till about early 2000, the women labour on the floor level of the factories were entirely from Kerala. The shift in labour profile began to be observed from after this period. Younger women from the fishing households of Kerala are reluctant to take this job as they were under the impression that it has a low social status. Even though the work is carried out in factories, the work is still referred to as 'peeling'. The composition of labour has been witnessing a drastic change with migrant workers now occupying the spaces that local women from Kerala once did. The study attempts to understand the composition of labour in this industry and their socio-economic status, especially migrant women labour.

Keywords: women labour, peeling, socio-economic status, fishing household

Introduction

The Indian seafood processing sector has been almost entirely oriented to export right from its infancy in the 1950s. Only in the very recent past has processed seafood found its way into the domestic supermarket chain, largely restricted to urban areas. The

availability and preference for fresh fish by the consumers; the profits that international seafood trade fetched; and the pro-active trade promotion policies of the government were the reasons for the export oriented approach of seafood industry in the country. India seafood exports reach about 106 countries in the world and it is one of the largest exporters of shrimp to countries like USA, Europe and Japan. Besides, it also exports cephalopods like squid, cuttlefish and octopus; crustaceans like lobsters and crabs; fish etc. in frozen or chilled forms and very small volumes in live form. In the year 2015-16 the export value of seafood had reached an all-time high of USD6.84billion (http://mpeda.gov.in/MPEDA/marine_products_exports.php#_ accessed 12 November, 2016). Kerala, a state lying in the south west coast of India, is a leading seafood exporter and one of the first states to begin modern seafood processing, contributing about 15.24% to the total value of exports. Out of the 465 approved factories in the country, 113 are in the state of Kerala with an installed capacity of 16.9% of the total for the country. The approvals for the seafood factories are given by the national agency, Export Inspection Council of India and approvals are for export specifically to EU countries or for exports other than EU countries. The countries approved for export to EU are generally referred to as EU-approved units or factories.

The industry was beset with problems concerning its quality standards during the late 1990s and early 2000s which saw consignments being rejected and this was one of the drivers for the overhaul of the factories. The imposition of stringent quality standards by the importing countries especially the developed ones like the EU, US and Japan have resulted in the overall improvement in the quality standards of the industry. The industry, through various policy and institutional support mechanisms was able to upgrade to meet the global standards of the importing countries.

The one major factor that was significant in the success of the seafood processing sector right from its inception has been its floor level women workforce who have been the backbone of the processing sector. (Monfort, 2015; World Bank 2010; Siason et al. 2002; Lambeth et al., 2014; Jeebhay et al. 2004). Women dominate the labour force in the seafood processing sector of the world (Gopal, 2009; De Silva, 2011; FAO 2012; Ancy, 2016). The actual processing work that converts the raw materials into the finished product is almost entirely carried out by women. The activities include sorting and grading of raw materials, peeling/ deveining, cleaning, degutting of materials that includes crustaceans, cephalopods, molluscs and fish. The processed product is then set into marketable forms or sizes before being frozen. Frozen products are once again packed by the women workers. The characteristics feature of this job is the need for dexterity and skill, but the work is repetitive and involves drudgery. The skill and

dexterity that the women possess as well as the patience and ability to bear drudgery are the precise reasons for the domination of women in the sector. Montford (2015), in his summary of various studies observes that the women are preferred because they 'are perceived to be trustworthy, dedicated, meticulous, flexible, compliant, quality minded and cheaper than men.' However, sadly, they are still categorized as semi or unskilled in many countries.

Since the Indian seafood industry took root in the state of Kerala, during the initial decades of expansion of the industry in various other coastal states, this small state had been responsible for supplying labour to the sector, especially to attend to the floor level pre-processing and processing work (Panini 1999; Nishchith, 2002; Salagrama, 2006). The women mostly belonged to the local fishing communities and they had a natural ability to handle and process seafood. Conditions were, however, exploitative and many of the women who came to the sector were from poor households with economic hardships and they came because they had no other livelihood choices or alternatives. Over the years, however, the improvement is the social indices in the state, resulting in a structural shift in the pattern of women being employed in the factories, including in the state of Kerala.

This paper explores the current pattern of employment in the sector in the state, especially with reference to the floor level where almost 100% of the processing activity takes place. It is pertinent to note that very few women have occupied higher positions in the industry at the management level, though they have manned quality control laboratories associated with seafood factories.

Materials and methods

Seven seafood processing factories were randomly selected from the Aroor-Chandiror belt of one of the southern districts, Alappuzha of Kerala state, which is also a major hub for seafood processing activity. All the factories are export-oriented and EU-approved which mean that they are approved and certified by regulatory bodies within the country and the production processes meet all the standards as prescribed by the importing authorities, including the EU block which has some of the most stringent product and process standards that the factories needed to conform to.

A mix of methodological approaches was used to collect information. A questionnaire based survey among randomly selected workers in the selected factories was carried out. The survey included questions on working conditions, wages and reasons for taking up this work. Overall, about 70 workers were interviewed. Focus group discussions

with groups of women, both migrant workers as well as local women workers were also conducted. These discussions mainly focused on the causes for migration and their hopes and aspirations. Discussions were also carried out with the management to understand the temporal and structural changes in the employee profile over the years.

Results and Discussion

As expected in the sector, women are the predominant workforce in all units surveyed at the floor level. Interestingly, very few women were observed in higher management positions (Lambeth, 2014; Hishamunda, 2014). The proportion of women to men is 1.6 to 1, indicating continued dependency on women in this sector. In the sampled units the percentage of total migrant labour (men and women) is 86%. The migrant women population account for 59% of the workforce and 27% of the workforce is the migrant men. The local women constitute only 14% of the employees at the floor level in these factories. The activity profile of the workers is given in Table 1. Though the dependence on women continues, it is observed that the women belonging to the local fishing communities are slowly leaving the workforce.

Table 1: Activity profile of male and female labourers

Sl. No.	Activities	Local women workers	Migrant women workers	Local men workers	Migrant men workers
1	Raw material unloading		P	P	
2	Fish loining	P	P		
3	Cutting, trimming	P	P		
4	Wiping	P	P		
5	Washing	P	P		
6	Grading	P	P		
7	Setting in trays	P	P		
8	Stacking		P	P	P
9	Loading trays to trolleys		P	P	P
10	Trolleys to slabs		P	P	P
11	Freezing		P	P	P
12	Unloading to packing sections		P	P	P
13	Packing in cartons		P	P	P
14	Labelling		P	P	P
15	Sewing		P	P	P
16	Loading for shipment			P	P

The local women now constitute only about 12% of the workforce in these factories. As mentioned earlier, women from Kerala have been the major workforce in seafood factories all over the country until about two decades ago. The spaces that women from here vacated are now being occupied by women from other states. While the trend started in the early 2000s, the depletion of local workforce is accelerating in the recent years. While in the beginning, the labour that replaced the local women workers came from the neighbouring southern states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, but in the recent years, women from far away north-eastern states like Assam and the eastern parts of the country like Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar, are also joining the workforce. The influx of labour from northern and northeastern part of the country is also seen in other sectors of the economy of the state, for eg. hotels, small scale manufacturing etc. (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/08/reverse-migration-haunts-kerala>_accessed 10 November 2016). This trend is also visible in the fishing industry, where men working in fishing boats and harbours are also now migrants from other states including land locked northern states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar etc. In the processing sector what is notable is that while Karnataka, Orissa, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu are coastal states, but Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand etc. are states in the northern and northeastern parts of the country and are land locked. The fish available in this region is generally inland fish and the people of the state are not consumers of fish from the sea and it is unlikely that the women are familiar with the species commonly processed for export. The percentage of the women migrant from different states are 45% from Karnataka, 15% from Assam, 14% from Orissa, followed by 12% from Kerala, and another 12% with a small percentage from other eastern states like West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar.

Even until the early 2000s, women from Kerala constituted about 75% of the workforce and the percentage must have been higher before that (Nishchint, 2004). This percentage is dropping rapidly and the major reason for this is due to the efforts of the state in providing various socially relevant schemes stressing on literacy and health. It is the first state in India to be declared fully literate (<http://spb.kerala.gov.in/images/er/er14/index.html#p=15>_accessed 9 November 2016) with a literacy rate of 97.14% among men and 94.27% among women. The public healthcare system is a fairly well-established network of primary health centres at the village level. Although for the fishing communities these indicators are slightly lower, but it is still high when compared to the indices averages of the other states. The betterment of social indices has led to a shift away from fishing and fish related work among the younger generation in the fishing communities (Joseph, Edwin; personal communication; 7 November 2016) who now prefers jobs in a more 'cozy' environment like shopping

malls or textile shops. Besides, the work in seafood processing is still referred to as 'peeling' locally and it is not considered as a job with high societal status. Hence, the reason why the younger educated girls or women do not want to enter this workforce.

The work in the processing factories entails standing continuously for about nine to ten hours in cold and wet conditions. This can get extremely uncomfortable even with the overalls and uniforms that are provided by the management. Constant exposure and contact with cold water also affects the hands and feet, even with protective gear. For raw material like fish the use of gloves comes in the way and the women prefer to work bare-handed even though it is not a recommended practice.

A notable feature of seafood processing women workers is that a majority of them are young at around 21 years old, including the migrant women. Studies all over the world have shown that there is a preference for young women in such labour intensive production systems (for eg. the garment industry) (Nuruzzaman, 2014). The reasons for this are that they usually have no reproductive responsibilities to take care of and can be employed for longer hours. Since most of these women have limited education, therefore, they are employed at lower wages. In contrast, the average age of local women workers is 39.83 years old, indicating that older women are still continuing the work in the factories that they have been employed since very young. The local younger women are not entering the workforce. This is also because the work demands long and sometimes erratic working hours depending on the availability and arrival of raw material. Migrant men are about 24.39 years of age on an average. The women who migrate may do so through two means. One, they can be recruited by contractors who supply labour to the factories. This has been the route through which the initial migration from Kerala state to other states took place. Contractors are usually local men who know the backgrounds and economic conditions of the women. Even now the contractors are an integral part of the labour supply chain. Secondly, the first of the migrant women are a motivation for the other women from their native villages and they follow them to these factories.

The women are educated up to secondary or higher secondary levels and most of them come from families of about 5 members. The local women workers have smaller families of about 4 persons. The smaller families among local women workers can also be attributed to the health initiatives taken by the State.

Almost 82.75% of the migrant labour population comes from families that are listed below poverty line (BPL) category of households, in comparison to 33% among the local

women workforce. Thus, economic considerations are the major cause for migration of these women from the native states. As mentioned earlier, women from some of the states from where they have migrated from may have never seen seafood being processed earlier. The reasons for migration from Kerala and from other states now are almost the same: poverty and economic hardships. The factories, especially in the state of Kerala, are forced to take in the migrant workforce as the supply of local labour is fast depleting (Joseph, Edwin; personal communication; 7 November 2016). The migrant women workers are first trained in processing. The product and process requirements are very stringent in these factories and unskilled workers may result in losses to the management. This is the reason why the women are provided with training in processing work. Work is generally seasonal and depends on the availability of raw material. The women get a break in their employment during the off seasons.

Factories also take care of the workforce so that they can be retained. One reason is that they have incurred expenses towards training these women. They also have to follow the norms in the industry with regards to the wages paid and other allowances given. It is, thus, important for them that this trained manpower continues to work for their factories. About 98.27% of migrant workforce (women and men) stay in the accommodation arranged by the factories. Of them, 77.58% live in dormitories or hostels inside the factory campuses, and the rest in houses which are rented for them by the factories. Dormitory or houses are separated for the men and women. Food is also provided at subsidised rates which are deducted from their salaries. Some companies provide the facilities for the migrant workers to cook for themselves as the food habits vary between the states. Factories are also providing travel allowances, bonus and over time benefits.

Salaries are generally on an hourly basis and the average monthly salary received by the migrant workers is found to be at INR 6822 (approx. USD 114). The wages are not equal for women and men with men earning an average of INR 13043 (approx. USD 217), and women earning at INR 6333 (approx. USD 106). This has been the trend in the seafood industry throughout its existence (Gopal et. al., 2009; Sathyan et. al. 2014). Women's work is considered unskilled or semi-skilled and the wage differential exists despite the fact that women perform all activities at the floor level, except for the loading of the finished product for shipment which is done by the men. This is also another reason why younger women from local areas do not want to enter into this profession. Women, especially from Karnataka, are working only to earn just about enough to arrange for their marriage. As for the local workers, their needs are to pay off debts, educating their children or building better houses.

The working environment affects the health of the women, especially those who are exposed to the cold conditions inside the factories (Nag and Nag, 2007). Most factories have a health check-up done before the start of the season. In all the processing plants surveyed, visiting doctor provision has been made usually on a monthly interval for check-ups. A few factories also reimburse the employees' medical bills. However, it is observed that they do not undergo any regular or periodic medical check-ups. The only source of information and entertainment is television and newspapers. However, all the workers possess mobile phones.

Conclusions

The seafood processing sector in Kerala is witnessing a reverse migration with women from Kerala who used to dominate the processing space now being replaced by migrant workers from other states of the country. Women from Kerala no longer find the sector attractive due to improvement in their social conditions, while women from other states look at it as an opportunity to earn a living and support their families back home. The migrant labour force is a floating population who wishes to go back to their native places after saving enough money to meet their short-and-medium term needs. Though the working conditions have improved because of the need of the industry for assured workforce to keep operations going, wages continue to be different for men and women. There is a need to also ensure that all labour laws are in place and auditing from that aspect must also be carried out. Many factories are getting certified for international standards to meet the requirements of importing trading partners but most of these standards are voluntary. The underlying fact is that the human resource in these factories is the reason for the export earnings.

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