

On
World
Women's Day
that falls on
March 8, a look
at the lives of
women in
fisheries



FISHING FOR A LIFE

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Revamma's day begins early. At 3.30 am to be precise. Waking up at that hour, the 46 year old cooks for her family of five which includes her husband and three school going children, and attends to other household chores. By 5.00 am she and her husband leave their house to begin fishing in one of the many small chaals of the sprawling Vembanad estuary. With pots and scoop nets, expertly using her feet and hands, Revamma is adept at catching scampi, pearl spot, crabs and other fishes. Her husband uses a cast net. All the fish caught is given to an agent for sale in the market who gets a commission of 10% from the sales proceeds. The rest makes up for the meager income this couple makes.

In the popular psyche, women are seldom associated with fishing. That they do not go fishing in the open seas is no reason for their marginalization. About 50 per cent of all fish workers are women, they are mainly seen as fish sellers. They may be workers in peeling sheds and processing factories. They are traditional processors of fish - salting and drying fish.

The contribution of women should not be looked at from the point of view of simplistic division of labour. The fact that they engage in fishing and contribute to the household nutritional security and pitch in with their income, is rarely valued.

In almost all the states women fish for livelihood or subsistence. In Bengal women in

small dug out canoes eek out a living fishing in the Sundarbans. They collect fry from the mouths of estuaries with their bare hands which feeds the aquaculture sector. In the north eastern states, women use large scoop nets that are very typical to this region, for fishing.

Migrant women from Andhra Pradesh can be seen fishing perched precariously on coracles, often with sleeping children in their laps, in the backwaters of Kerala. Even when we say women don't venture into the sea or are not allowed to venture into the sea, there are exceptions. The fisherwomen near the Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu go diving into the sea for collecting seaweeds. Groups of women dive in their saris with rudimentary goggles and little else in the form of protection. The invisibility of all these women, in what is essentially an economic activity that supports their families, is thus surprising.

For women in other fisheries activities like marketing, lack of resources for upscaling businesses is an issue and they continue to

remain small scale in operation. Over the years their operational spaces have either shrunk or have been occupied by others, mostly men.

Lack of safety and physical abuse in markets have also been reported. In seafood processing sector, women form almost all of the labour force and work through exacting conditions and wages are not generally commensurate with skill.

The invisibility apart, does being engaged in fisheries related activities and businesses give these fisherwomen control over their incomes? Contrary to generalization, the strong koli women from Mumbai make majority of the decisions regarding their businesses, but fisherwomen have very little access to productive resources and their control over them is non-existent. Their activities are invisible, and so are their incomes, which are almost always only a part of the family pool of resources.

Revamma does not have the freedom to decide whether to sell the fish she caught or keep a few of them for dinner back home.



Dr. Nikita Gopal
Principal Scientist

ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin
(The author has been working in the area of gender in aquaculture and fisheries for the past decade)