

Joeanna Fernandes &
Kamini Mathai | TNN

It's 9am, and Vaishali Gajanand Balasathi is already halfway through her workday. She's done with the easy bit — waking at 3.30am, catching the 4.10am BEST bus from Mumbai's Khar Danda to the wholesale fish market at Sassoon Dock, jostling with hundreds of men and women from one auctioneer to the next; and having her wares iced and trucked out to Bandra's Chimbai street market, where she plies her trade.

Now comes the hard part: sales. "After Covid, only a quarter of our customers have been coming to the market. The rest shop online," says Balasathi, a fisherwoman and BCom graduate from Mumbai's Koli community of fishers. Prior to the pandemic, she used to reserve her unsold stock for the following day, bracing for the price drop that came with hawking day-old fish. Now, she creates content of her 'catch of the day', uploading images and videos of palm-sized tiger prawns and gleaming barramundi on her WhatsApp customer group. And as orders fly in, she lines them up for delivery on an app. "If the value of the order is more than Rs 2,500, the buyer and I split the delivery cost; otherwise, they pick up the tab," she grins.

Weighing The Scales

For years, Indian fisherwomen have steered a straight course from boat to market — holding fast to tradition in their work practices, trade routes, and modes of transaction. In recent years, however, several factors have made the women change tack: declining demand; reduced artisanal catch from industrial fishing and coastal infrastructural projects; limited access to markets and tenuous access to streets; competition from male migrant fish vendors; and risk of heat stress.

Bolstered by unions and non-profits, they have started to mobilise, strategise and modernise their traditional livelihoods.

These shifting currents are part of a global groundswell of activism that led to the creation of International Fisher Women's Day on Nov 5 — a resolution adopted at the 8th General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples in Brazil last year. This year marks the first commemoration of the day.

Globally — and in India — women account for nearly half the workforce engaged in fisheries. According to the gov't's Handbook on Fisheries Statistics 2023, fisherwomen — numbering about 12.4 million — make up 44% of the country's total fisher population (marine and inland), which stands

even before the boats set sail," says Ujjwala Patil, leader of the Mumbai fisherwomen's union, Daryavardi Mahila Sangh (DMS). "They mend the nets, manage the boats, and organise water, rations and even diesel for the crew. And when the vessels return, they segregate the catch, dry, process and sell it."

Despite shouldering the bulk of pre- and post-catch work, fisherwomen have been overlooked in policy and decision-making. This has resulted in exclusion from govt programmes and schemes, observed a 2020 report by UN Women on the economic status of women in Indian Ocean Rim Countries, of which India is a part.

A 2024 paper on women in Indian fisheries, published by ICAR-Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, offers a more granular look at the problems on the ground. These include poor access to credit



FROM SORTING FRESH CATCH AT THE HARBOUR...



...TO TAKING IT TO MARKET



...AND DRYING SOME
Women shoulder bulk of
pre- and post-catch work

SHORE TO SALE

Fisherwomen make their voices heard

As the world marks the first International Fisher Women's Day today, TOI turns the spotlight on how Indian fisherwomen, long sidelined in policy and markets, are mobilising for equity — modernising trade, asserting identity, and breaking stereotypes



Her catch of the day: Sailfish

Of India's 28mn total fisher population (marine and inland) in 2019-20,

12mn are women



areas and inadequate lighting at harbours and markets, and a host of occupational diseases.

Terminology itself elided their existence. "Until recently, 'fishermen' was widely used as a catch-all to include men and women in both govt policy and union titles, further rendering the women and their work invisible," says Priya Dharshini, coordinator, Delhi Forum, an organisation that works closely with the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF). (The Fisheries Handbooks 2023 refers to them as 'female fishermen').

Determined to be seen and heard in their own right, rather than as adjuncts to male-led movements, fisherwomen across the country are asserting their identity and pushing for social and economic equity. They are doing this by carving a place for themselves in local governance, mobilising for policy reform, and adopting new marketing models. This

Indian Fisherwomen's Assembly 2024 in Kerala where, for the first time, fisherwomen from across the country gathered to unify their demands and chart a collective course of action.

Sales Force

On a rainy Tuesday last week, a board meeting was underway in an apartment-turned-office in Sewri Koliwada, a fishing hamlet in Mumbai. Around the room sat 10 fisherwomen — directors of Daryavardi Producer Company Limited (DPCL) — a fisher producer organisation formed in 2023 by DMS. Also present were union leaders and representatives of Vrutti, a non-profit that supports the livelihood of small-scale fishers. On the agenda were plans to operate stalls in wholesale municipal markets to sell fair-price fish to DPCL members, a male-dominated operation. The women also reviewed their sales

— such as 'laminated' Bombay duck, fish chakli, and fish burgers — by women self-help groups trained at the Central Institute of Fisheries Education and Jaljeevika (a not-for-profit organisation) to help fisherwomen diversify their income, build entrepreneurial skills, and tap into a steady value-added supply chain.

Since the Covid lockdown, Vrutti has been training fisherwomen in digital and financial literacy. "One of our biggest challenges was convincing the women to accept digital payments," says Sonia Garcha, project lead at Vrutti. The women preferred cash — it gave them greater control over the family's finances. "But when we told them it would help them access govt insurance, and we partnered with nationalised banks to bring these services to their doorstep, over 5,000 of them opened accounts."

Maharashtra has the highest number of women engaged in fish marketing (53,603), according to the Marine Fisheries Census 2016. "But the state only began mobilising for social and livelihood rights in the last decade," says Patil. "DMS now has 6,000 members."

Worker Rights, Social Inclusion

Fisherwomen in Kerala and Tamil Nadu began fighting for their rights in the 1980s. In Kerala, for instance, one of the first victories of the Coastal Women's Forum came after a long struggle to secure public transport for women fishworkers: the govt eventually allotted them a special bus to travel to the market.

In Tamil Nadu, liberation for the fisherwomen began with a fistful of rice. When the Fisherwomen's Federation began in 1984, the 'subscription' fee was a handful of rice, says

to the federation and member of Social Need Education and Human Awareness (Sneha), the nonprofit that helped strengthen the organisation. "That was all the women could afford. The group met twice a week and members contributed a handful of rice at every meeting."

Initially, it didn't seem like much, says Vanaja, but during the rains, when fishing came to a halt, that rice helped sustain families. The federation, which has 4,500 members, has become a platform for awareness and education.

'Meenava' Shanthi (translated to 'fisherwoman' Shanthi), who started the Indian Union of Fisherwomen in 2000, says one of the biggest problems facing fisherwomen in India is gender discrimination. "In Tamil Nadu, during the monsoon fishing ban, fishermen get Rs 8,000 to tide them over, but women get nothing. Women-headed families suffer the most."

The Coastal Rights Act (CRA) proposed by fishing federations — and modelled on the Forest Rights Act — seeks to end such discrimination. "At its core, CRA seeks to recognise fishers as an indigenous com-

I upload images and videos of daily catch on a WhatsApp group... and orders fly in

—VAISHALI GAJANAND BALASATHI
Mumbai



munity with a distinct cultural identity and heritage — much like Adivasis," says Priya Dharshini. "It calls for legal rights to land and benefits, rather than defining them narrowly by their occupation alone."

Inland Fisheries

Unlike the marine fisherwomen's movement, which has evolved into a powerful lobby, inland fisherwomen are yet to collectivise. "Around 2.3 crore people are involved in inland fisheries in India, but there's little done for them, let alone for women. What incentives are provided are for aquaculture, not artisanal fishers," says Manish Rajankar, director of the Foundation for Economic and Ecological Development (FEED), an organisation which, along with non-profit CORO India, has inducted over 500 women into artisanal pond-fishing in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, in the last two years.

Women, says Rajankar, play a pivotal role in inland fisheries. "As preservers and practitioners of traditional knowledge, they know what it takes to develop healthy habitats for fish and how to catch them sustainably." So, when women thrive in fisheries, it isn't just good