Fishing as trade is often associated with men embodying bellicose characteristics. While women play an imperative role in the fishing supply chain, their efforts are constantly undervalued. Fisherwomen's work being undermined is a symptom of an established gender-based hierarchical system and designated roles that relegate women to underpaid labour and invisibility.

A typical day for a fisherwoman starts at around 3 A.M, as her husband leaves for the sea, and ends at approximately 4 P.M when the markets close for the day. She wakes up early, much before her contemporaries anywhere else, to prepare breakfast before the fishermen leave. The auctions, almost entirely run by women, begin at 6 A.M sharp. Meanwhile, the activities at Goubert Fish Market (also known as the main market) and the Ambour Salai Market (formerly known as the Senji Salai Market) begin as early as 4 A.M, so she reaches there and prepares for the day ahead.
With their interconnected lanes, visible spots in this expansive market are competitive; sales even more so. Big buckets of everything from crabs and lobsters to various local species of fish adorn the platforms as women call out to customers to grab their attention. Close to 360 fisherwomen from three villages- Kurichikuppam, Vaithikuppam and Vamba Keerapalayam set up their stalls after buying fish in bulk, from the auction sites and imports from states such as Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The women keep coming till 7-8 A.M, with the last set of women carrying the fish that their husbands catch in the sea. The hustle-bustle at the market sites peaks around 2 P.M. After finishing up their activities, these women rush back to tend to household chores where they juggle cooking, cleaning and caregiving, to hold the fort at home.

““I HAD TO JUGGLE BETWEEN BEING A FISH SELLER IN THE MORNING AND A HOUSEWIFE IN THE EVENING. THIS WAS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT WHEN I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF MY CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY AFTER THEY STARTED GOING TO SCHOOL... THAT WAS WHY I SPENT LESS TIME IN THE MARKET. THERE WERE TIMES WHEN I DID NOT GO TO THE MARKET TO SELL FISH TO TAKE CARE OF MY CHILDREN - MAKING SURE THAT THEY EAT, TAKE LUNCH TO SCHOOL, GO AND COME BACK FROM SCHOOL SAFELY AND SO ON. ”- MEENA, A FISH SELLER FROM CHINNA MUDALIYAR CHAVADI, TAMIL NADU.

Post this “break” from fishing activities, senior women of the household are seen leaving for the market once again, circumstance does not allow them to succumb to their age and retire. The daughters-in-law are left behind to cook meals for the latter half of the day. The fisherfolk begin to pack up and leave from 7 P.M While the day of a daily wage worker usually ends at 7 P.M anywhere else, for those engaged in fishing activities, days start early and end late. However, during the fishing ban period, fisherwomen leave much earlier, around 12:30-1:00 P.M, as they struggle to sell the assortment of fish imported from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.
These fisherwomen work tirelessly to make ends meet and play a vital role in managing their household finances. All respondents report that the women in the families (wives for older fishermen and mothers for the youth) take care of the budget. Decisions on how to spend the received income are also in the hands of these women. While male respondents reported that they are the ones who purchase fishing equipment and other household goods, they collect the money from the women in the family.

Fisherwomen, often, dwell in the lower socio-economic strata of society. Not only do they have to pay the price of surviving harsh conditions and economic challenges, but they also face resistance due to their gender identity. The nature of their jobs is also unreliable owing to the environmental uncertainties and life-threatening risks that are associated with the profession. Evidently, fisherwomen actively play the role of breadwinners while also being caregivers and home-makers, all in a restrictive and gender-polar environment.

“ALL THE EXPENSES ARE TAKEN CARE OF BY ME. MY HUSBAND ONLY PAYS THE BILLS AND TAXES, BUT HE TAKES THE MONEY FROM ME. I KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT HAS BEEN TO PAY THE BILLS AND MAKE THE ENDS MEET. FOR EXAMPLE, WE WERE NOT ABLE TO PAY OUR ELECTRICITY BILL FOR MONTHS BECAUSE WE DID NOT HAVE ANY INCOME DURING THE 7 MONTHS OF THE COVID PANDEMIC. INSTEAD OF GIVING ANY CONCESSIONS, THEY CHARGED INTEREST ON OUR BILLS. FOR OUR HOUSEHOLD, THE ELECTRICITY BILL AVERAGES RS. 1500..” - MARIYAMMA, A FISH SELLER FROM VAMBA KEERAPALAYAM, PUDUCHERRY.
Women have been confined to shore-based labour within the fishing industry. The reasons behind these are twofold: venturing into the sea is seen as a physically strenuous and unsafe activity; hence women are often expected to avoid that aspect of the trade. Secondly, women from a non-fishing background, when married to a fisher family, are expected to support their husbands through the relentless fishing industry. Since entering the sea requires traditional knowledge and skill, women are allocated the duty of auctioning and sales.

“MY FAMILY WAS NEVER IN THE FISHING TRADE. I WAS TRAINING TO BE A NURSE. BUT I WAS FORCED TO GET INTO THE BUSINESS AS I WAS MARRIED OFF TO A FISHERMAN, AND MY HUSBAND’S FAMILY WANTED ME TO SUPPORT HIS TRADE.”- SELVI, FISH SELLER FROM VAITHIKUPPAM, PUDUCHERRY.

Women, specifically from the age of 35-60, are found managing and selling the fish yield. They dominate the auction sites and marketplaces and often collaborate and negotiate to get better rates. If the day’s catch does not get sold, they are put in iceboxes. If this fish is not sold by the second day, it is the women who brine, cure and dry them to be sold as Karuvadu, a staple in Tamil Nadu. The respondents have reported how Karuvadu sells at a low price. They say this reduces their income by almost one-fourths of what they would have earned otherwise.
The 6 A.M auction begins with laying out the day's catch in front of various groups of fisherwomen. However small the yield quantity is, these women only have eyes on the quality. Bidding begins, often going up to Rs. 1200 - Rs. 1400 for the catch. The overseeing community members chalk up a receipt, which the fishermen then cash out as their income for the day (10% of this amount goes for community welfare). The women then go around selling the catch in markets dedicated to women from specific fishing villages and deposit the required amount to the money collectors at the auction sites. They go home with a meagre profit of around Rs. 50 - Rs. 150 daily, arguably negligible compared to their effort.
Alongside seeking revenue, fisherwomen also feel motivated to spend long, exhausting hours at the markets because of their devotion to feeding people, especially their families. Several respondents echoed this sentiment during the interviews, which reinforces the values of a nurturer instilled within a woman from a young age. They have been given a minimal choice in their role as nurturers and, more often than not, are toilers due to circumstance alone. The patriarchal notion that determines gender duties is infamous for reducing women’s role to ‘servers’ who support the ‘providing’ men.

"I CANNOT SEND MY HUSBAND IN THE BOAT NOW AS HE IS NEARING 60 YEARS OF AGE. BUT I HAVE TO SEND HIM TO EARN MONEY EVERY DAY. EVEN I HAVE TO GO EVERY DAY TO SELL FISH IN THE MARKET. THIS IS SEEN EVERYWHERE IN OUR VILLAGE. EVERYONE HAS TO GO TO THE SEA AND THE MARKET EVERY DAY BECAUSE IF ONE PERSON GOES TO THE SEA, FOUR PEOPLE WILL EAT THAT DAY."- MEENA, A FISH SELLER FROM CHINNA MUDALIAR CHAVADI, TAMIL NADU.
“DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE MARKETS WERE CLOSED. WE HAD TO SIT ON THE STREETS IN THE VILLAGES TO SELL OUR FISH. THE POLICE WOULD CHASE US, AND WE WOULD HIDE. AFTER THEY LEAVE, WE WOULD SIT BACK AND START SELLING AGAIN. BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, I EARNED RS. 300-400 EVERY DAY. DURING THE PANDEMIC, IT REDUCED TO RS. 200. AFTER THE PANDEMIC STARTED EASING, THE MODEL CHANGED. PEOPLE STARTED SELLING FISH BY THE STREETS AND STARTED OPENING THEIR OWN SHOPS. I LOST A HUGE SHARE OF MY INCOME BECAUSE OF THAT AS NO ONE CAME TO THE MARKET. TODAY, I ONLY GET RS. 100-150 ON WEEKDAYS, AND RS. 500 ON SUNDAY.”- SELVI, A FISH SELLER FROM VAITHIKUPPAM, PUDUCHERRY.

The pandemic worsened the already bleak conditions in the fishing industry. Mobility and income restrictions added to the pressures faced by the women. Many women, who are educated, had to home tutor their children in the wake of school shutdowns. They also had to assume additional caregiving duties in the household due to dietary changes and health issues. The government welfare schemes were limited to rice distribution and did not provide for the complete nutritional needs of the family, adding to their long list of worries.

The financial hardships that the fisherfolk faced also forced them to pawn jewellery. While the choice to do so may have been a joint decision, once again, it was the women who had to bear the brunt of the shock. Jewellery, in these parts, is often passed down through generations and given when daughters are married off. Apart from it holding sentimental value, the jewellery is also given as a personal asset to the woman by her parents. Still, it is often pawned off for the welfare of the household.
While women contribute significantly to the fishing industry, their efforts are often left out of the narrative. Their concerns about vulnerability to recurring unexpected shocks, such as environmental catastrophes and the pandemic, that immediately leave them penniless, need to be assessed and mitigated. The gendered roles and circumstances, while clearly visible, have not been addressed adequately in any measure. While fishermen are equipped with specific boats which suit the weather and tractors to reel back such boats, infrastructure for fisherwomen is severely underdeveloped. Even dedicated market spaces for women have crowded seating platforms and dysfunctional toilets.

Understanding the undertones of such polarity that govern this industry is also imminent to make the welfare schemes more inclusive. The State needs to introduce specific policy interventions that acknowledge and target the needs of women. For instance, the liquidation of women’s assets can be minimised with the implementation of Mahila Banks and the provision of loans specifically for fisherwomen. Alongside that, measures need to be taken to create awareness regarding the existing policy options among the masses, as they currently possess no knowledge regarding the same. It is vital to include the women’s specific context in the discourse to normalise their involvement in the paid workforce and protect them from exploitation.
Women play board games in their free time at Vaithikuppam village, Puducherry

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