

Evolving space for fishers' families in the western Bay of Bengal region

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The western Bay of Bengal (WBOB) comprising Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives represents a socioecological kaleidoscope. India is recognized as an emerging economic power and Sri Lanka boasts a higher level of human development, while Maldives has much higher per capita income and Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in alleviating poverty, illiteracy and in other indicators of human development.¹

Marine fisheries constitute an important pillar of economic development in all these countries. While its contribution to the national economies in monetary terms may not be significant, the importance of the fisheries sector lies in providing employment to millions of people in the coastal areas, ensuring food security and as a valuable source of foreign exchange.²

Living along the coastline and sourcing livelihoods from the coastal and offshore waters, WBOB fisher families are constantly exposed to the vagaries of nature and occupational hazards. Deeply mired in the traditional family occupation and with limited options for diversification, their lives and livelihoods are more vulnerable than their counterparts in agriculture or other primary-sector occupations. Traditionally, fisheries have been a male preserve, and resultantly women-headed households or households comprising mostly women stand as disadvantaged groups in the community.

Notwithstanding these inherent weaknesses in the sector, a set of ongoing initiatives by governments, civil society organizations working with fisher communities, and inter-

governmental bodies like the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) have been bringing the desired changes and reducing the odds for fisher families. The BOBP, a regional fisheries body comprising the above-mentioned countries, is working with governments, fisher communities and the private sector to develop solutions for fisher families towards a sustainable future.

There are about 1.7 million active fishers in the WBOB region. Conservatively, this is translated to between 1.2 million and 1.7 million fisher families and about 10 million fisher people directly dependent on fisheries. From a subsistence, artisanal level of fishing until the early 1970s, the fisheries sector is now becoming increasingly capital-intensive and fishers are adapting to technology-driven fishery.

Fisheries in the region comprise three basic activities: preparation for fishing, fishing, and marketing. WBOB families mostly act as a production unit, with men involved in fishing and women playing an important role in net mending, helping the men prepare for fishing and in marketing. However, with the advent of capital-intensive fishing practices such as mechanization, fisheries are being reformed more in line with business enterprises, with specific roles such as financiers, service providers (craft and gear), vessel operators and crew members, marketing chains and processing units. With this development, the role of fisherwomen in fisheries has in many cases been squeezed.³ Although women are still involved in large numbers, especially in local retailing and primary processing and packaging, their declin-

Growth in the number of active fisher folk in the region

Country	Base year	Number	Latest year	Number	Growth
Bangladesh	2007	510,000	2011	516,000	0.3%
India	2005	901,815	2010	1,002,723	2.2%
Maldives	2003	14,891	2012	10,264	-3.5%
Sri Lanka	2004	132,600	2012	180,693	4.5%
Western BOB	2003	1,547,019	2012	1,697,040	1.1%

Source: BOBP



Image: S. Jayaram

A fisher couple in their small shop selling fishing implements, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh

ing space in the fisheries production system is a matter of concern with implications on household decision-making, food security and the social perception of women. This needs to be adequately addressed in policy measures.

Irrespective of the state of technology, fisher families are considered as vulnerable groups due to the multiple risks associated with their occupation (seasonality, market risks, occupational hazards); location (high exposure to natural hazard); asset specificity (lack of education, other employable skills, land) and lack of social safety (poverty, absence of steady income, congestion in fishery space). Therefore, ensuring the sustainability of fisher families has remained a difficult but not insurmountable challenge.

Recent initiatives in the region are trying to address this challenge by adopting multi-pronged strategies such as extension of social safety nets to fishers (India, Bangladesh), women's empowerment and marketing support (India, Sri Lanka), access to alternative sources of finance such as micro-finance, hedging against market risks (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka) and the introduction of new technologies for better income (Maldives and in and around the bay).

Livelihood issues

The increasing fisher population and resultant increasing competition for fish remains the major issue for the sustainability of fisheries livelihoods and the future of fisher families

The multi-day fishers of Chakaria

Chakaria is a major fishing locality in the Cox's Bazaar district of Bangladesh. Fishers here usually work as crew in multi-day mechanized fishing vessels, which camp for about six months in and around the Sundarbans deltaic area. The fishers usually receive a lump sum as advance payment for their engagement from the vessel owner. The amount depends on their role in the fishing operation, relation with the vessel owner, expected profits and revenues from past operations. They hand this money to their families to cover the cost of food and basic needs while they are away. The fisher's food and other needs are taken care of by the vessel owner.

Families back home, mostly women, children and elderly members, often find this advance insufficient to meet the cost of food, health and other expenses. In many cases, unforeseen expenditure leads the families to borrow from local moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates (30-60 per cent). They also maintain credit accounts in local stores.

In a good year, fishers return with sufficient compensation to pay off their debts and keep good standing within the community. However, this security is extremely fragile. During a bad year, the families are unable to repay their debts unless they have had a series of good years. Therefore, they live in perpetual poverty with a high debt burden.

Families often face destitution if the earning member has an accident or dies. In such cases, the family loses its creditworthiness and is often driven out of the house by creditors. Since very few earning opportunities are available for women, they are forced to live on the mercy of the community and relatives and do odd jobs such as fish vending, fish drying or farm work. Often, they end up begging while their children leave school and work as labourers.



Image: S. Jayaraj

A traditional fisher and his wife preparing for the fishing trip, Mahabalipuram, India

Women fish vendors in Chennai

Fish retailing in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu State in India, is largely dominated by the fisherwomen. Compared to their counterparts in Bangladesh or those of rural coastal areas in Tamil Nadu, the Chennai women fish vendors enjoy better living conditions. They are also mostly associated with the mechanized fisheries sector and are economically well off.

However, these fisherwomen also face a host of issues. Their problems start with the transportation of fish from Chennai fishing harbour and wholesale markets to their retailing locations. Public transporters and commuters often object to carrying fish due to smell and seepage. The marketplaces do not have adequate refreshment or toilet amenities for the women. The transportation problem has been partially addressed by Government-provided dedicated rail coaches for vendors, and women catering to the same locality have formed groups to hire private transport.

Apart from logistics, another major issue is to properly preserve and display products during retailing. Since fish is highly perishable, it perishes quickly in Chennai's tropical weather if not properly insulated. The use of ice boxes, promoted by the BOBP in the early 1990s, is yet to be adopted by all fisherwomen. The Government is also promoting the use of ice boxes by providing small subsidies to offset the cost. The availability of quality ice is also a constraint at times for these fish vendors.

in the region.⁴ While production seems to be increasing, qualitative aspects remain a concern, as the share of undersized fish and low-economic value fish in the total catch is increasing. In most cases there is over-employment and the fishers' share in the total revenue is negligible. Some major fisheries are overexploited and their catch is declining. This is leading to fisheries management measures, such as time and area closure, causing temporary loss of income for fisher families.

Fishing is one of the riskiest occupations in the world as thousands of people die every year while fishing at sea. While developed fishing nations have surveillance programmes to track mortality in fisheries, any such programme is yet to be implemented in WBOB. Towards this, the BOBP and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health conducted a study during 2007-2010 to understand the mortality pattern and causes of accidents at sea. The study found that mortality in the region is about three times as high as in the developed nations. Lack of use of personal safety and communication equipment, weak coordination with surveillance agencies, faulty vessel construction and frequent bad weather are the major reasons for this high mortality.



Image: S. Jayaraj

A fisher couple removing a bumper catch from gill net, Negombo, Sri Lanka

Global warming is likely to increase the sea level, threatening fisher settlements along the coastline. Already there are reports of severe coastal erosion from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Maldives also faces a high risk from global warming as many areas of this low-lying country may be flooded in the next 50 years if the sea level continues to rise. The WBOB countries, especially Bangladesh and India, are highly prone to cyclones and storm surges. In the past decade the region has witnessed many devastating cyclones, including the December 2004 tsunami that caused unprecedented damage to lives and livelihoods in India and Sri Lanka. Fishing communities on the coast are directly affected by such extreme weather incidences, making families vulnerable to loss of livelihoods and poverty.

Apart from climate change, versatile uses of coastline and marine waters from industry to tourism to exploration are also threatening the fisheries sector. Since these activities are economically more remunerative than fisheries, they are often favoured in national developmental approaches. In addition, growing industrialization and urbanization is increasing the chances of pollution further threatening fisheries biodiversity and livelihoods.

With the setting up of the Marine Protected Areas and declaration of many coastal stretches as protected grounds for iconic marine species such as turtles, the livelihoods of fisher families have been badly affected. The collision between marine biodiversity conservation and livelihoods is becoming a matter of grave concern as these fisher families have little option outside the sector. While steps are being taken now to involve local communities in the

conservation process, a thorough participatory approach will be needed before parts of the coastline are designated as protected areas.

Regional initiatives for vulnerability reduction

The Government of India, in association with provincial governments, runs a fully subsidized insurance programme for fishers, providing compensation in case of accidental death, permanent disability or loss of limb up to INR 100,000 (approximately US\$1,666). Around 4 million fishers are currently covered by the scheme.⁵

Recently the Government of Bangladesh, through its nationalized insurance agency, Jiban Bima Corporation, introduced a group insurance scheme whereby fishers form a group of at least 50 people and pay the premium. The scheme has filled a void in the social security space for fishers in Bangladesh and has achieved fast penetration since it was launched in October 2012. The annual per capita premium is Tk 1,240 (approximately US\$16) for an assured sum of Tk 200,000 (around US\$2,500). The scheme covers natural death, accidental death and permanent disability. Partial disability is not yet covered under the scheme. The term of the plan is for three years.⁶

Self-help groups (SHGs) in the region, promoted mostly by non-governmental organizations since the late 1990s, have become a major tool of organizing fisherwomen and creating opportunities for additional or alternative livelihoods. Fisherwomen were initially apprehensive of joining such groups, but a host of institutional features such as microfinance, which preferred such groups over individuals, created space for the development of SHGs. Although

no figures are available, most major fishing centres in the region have three to four women's SHGs involved in various activities from fish vending, processing, seaweed farming or making pickles to alternative options such as animal husbandry, sewing and petty commercial activities. However, further hand-holding is required to make the fisherwomen SHGs more market-savvy and improve the market penetration of their products.

Like many other parts of the world, families in the WBOB region also play a crucial role in shaping harvesting decisions and effort level, as well as building the human capital necessary for developing alternative skills to move outside the fisheries sector. For example, the awareness levels of women on safety at sea influence the preparedness of the men when going fishing, as well as during emergencies.

An important step towards ensuring family sustainability is to recognize the role of fisherwomen in the family. Apart from the technological barriers mentioned above, fisher families share a host of sociocultural barriers with rest of society in the region. Therefore, the task is quite challenging. However, designing institutions and workplaces in a women-friendly way could be the first step towards empowerment. The role of women in decision-making can also be boosted through a better safety-at-sea regime in which women participate in trip planning and preparation.

In fisheries management, there is a steady movement towards inclusive decision-making processes with greater community participation. Although, in practice, fisheries in the region are still managed through a top-down approach, with increasing community participation and feedback, more enabling policies are now being formed.

Empowering the fisherwomen of Toothoor



Image: Vincent Jain

Handicrafts made by Toothoor fisherwomen, Kanyakumari, India

The Association of Deep Sea-going Artisanal Fishermen, based in Toothoor, Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India has 3,168 male and 2,816 female members, categorized in three types:

- boat owners
- fishing crew
- fisherwomen, either from the family of the boat owner or the crew.

The fishermen fish in offshore waters and are out at sea for months together, while the fisherwomen look after the family and do petty business to make ends meet. Some 22-25 per cent of the fisherwomen do fish vending and 5-6 per cent engage in petty businesses like running tea shops or making fish products. The rest are homemakers and engage in various social and religious activities.

For the past couple of years, the association has provided training in skills such as making cloth bags, umbrellas, school bags, assembling solar lanterns, making liquid fertilizer from fish waste and handicraft items from sea shells. The objective is to empower the fisherwomen with skills that can add to the family income when their husbands are out at sea.

The story of Badal Das



Image: S. Jayeraj

Badal Das and his family

Badal Das, aged 31, from Jelepara Village in South Dhurang, Cox's Bazaar district, Bangladesh has been fishing for 15 years. During the last four to five years he has fished in the Sundarbans area, on the extreme west coast of Bangladesh. About 25-30 fishermen from his village and neighbouring areas go fishing during September-October, staying in the Sundarbans and adjacent areas for five to six months before returning home.

"While we carry some medicines, getting proper medical attention in case of emergency is extremely difficult and on most occasions a fisherman who meets with an accident or falls ill (mainly diarrhoea) is left to die," says Das. "Engine trouble is another major problem at sea. Boats that develop engine trouble often drift and land in neighbouring countries, where the fishermen land in jail and are released after protracted interventions by the Government. Our boats do not have lifesaving appliances or proper communication equipment to talk to the boat owner or to our families. Some crew members carry radios, which become our source of information. On most occasions, we get the cyclone warnings through the radio sets, but at times these warnings are received too late to move to sheltered areas.

"The boat owners are not willing to discuss our problems. If we argue, we lose the job. There is no compensation if a fisherman meets with an accident or dies. Our families go through hardships and do odd jobs to make ends meet when we are out at sea. If we take a loan from a moneylender, the interest rates are exorbitant. We do not get loans from the bank since we cannot meet their conditions.

"I have three children. I will ensure that they get a good education and settle well in life. I will neither allow my daughters to marry fishermen nor allow my son to take up the fishing profession," says Das.