

# FISHER WOMEN IN KERALA FIGHT BACK

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# **FISHER WOMEN IN KERALA FIGHT BACK**

**A Preliminary Study on the activities and struggles spearheaded  
by Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, the women's wing of Kerala  
Swathanthra Matsya Thozhilali Federation**

This is only a preliminary documentation of the activities and agitations of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi since its inception. The geographical focus of the study is coastal south Kerala. The study is an attempt to document the issues and vulnerabilities that are addressed by fisherwomen in the context of globalization. It also looks in to the impact of globalization and the new development initiatives on the livelihood conditions of fisherwomen. It is a historical documentation of the movement of issues like various forms of denial of rights and the impact of market on the fish workers community. Issues like gender bias, violence and sexual harassment on fisherwomen and their girl children are also briefly covered. A comprehensive study will be followed covering the entire Kerala coast and other gender related issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

In India, women constitute around 50% of the total population and comprise one-third of the labor force. The socio-economic development of this vast population, therefore, presumes great importance in any developmental strategy. It is estimated that there are 5.4 million people fully engaged in fisheries activities, of which, 3.8 million are fishermen and 1.6 million are fisherwomen. However, there is a considerable difference in the income earned between males and females with the former receiving the higher benefits even in the lean season. (*K. Samantray, An overview of women in the Indian fisheries sector and suggestions for improvement of their socio-economic status*)

Kerala with a total terrestrial area of 38000 square kilometers has a coastal line of 590 kilometers. Kerala holds the major share of exports in this sector from India. More than a million people belonging to the fishing communities live in 222 fishing villages in the State. About 2 lakh people depend on supplementary professions like processing and marketing of fish for their survival. (*Draft fisheries Policy of Kerala*)

The major activities, in which women's contribution can be noticed throughout the country, are fish processing and marketing. The involvement of women in these activities generates additional income to support their families. Even though women are as efficient as men, earnings are not always the same. Different payments to males and females are prevalent. It is through economic, social development and political struggles one can achieve economic progress. Although women comprise about half of the population, their role in development is not significant because of lack of empowerment. In fisheries, fisherwomen are generally engaged in marketing but their social status remains poor.

Most women lag far behind men in terms of earnings and in the services that would improve profitability. When fishing activities are expanded or mechanized, they are frequently taken over by men. The modern technological facilities also go in favour of men who can easily access it and make use of.

Considering the issues stated above this article will examine the following areas, which have direct, link with the socio-economic-political life, family life and livelihood conditions of fisherwomen in Kerala.

- The impact of globalization and the new development initiatives on the livelihood conditions of fisherwomen.
- The shifts of roles as fisherwomen become the bread earner.
- The types of vulnerabilities faced by fisherwomen.
- Various forms of denial of rights; private and public.
- A historical documentation of the movement of issues; past and present.
- The impact of market on the fish workers community.
- The injustices and atrocities in the markets by the contractors, their goondas, middlemen and moneylenders.
- The mobility factor in connection with labour.
- Health and family relationships.
- Anti fish worker and anti gender government policies.
- Sexual abuses on fisherwomen and their girl children.

### **THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON FISHERWOMEN**

The fish workers contribute a major share to Kerala's developmental. Globalisation and modernization brought radical changes in the fisheries sector both at the national and regional level. As a result traditional fish workers, who considered fishing as a subsistence support base, have to cope with it today as an industrial venture. Ironically they ceased to be the beneficiaries of this drastic change and had to become the dependants of big players in the field, who are not traditionally fish workers. Also, they are forcefully displaced and marginalized from their work place by various factors such as tourism, lake filling for mega constructions etc. Consequently men lost their hold in

the production process and women were forced to engage in income generation activities outside the house to support the domestic economic needs. Traditionally, in south Kerala women used to collect and sell fish caught by the community's men. But now they are forced to buy fish from big contractors or merchants and have to take great effort to sell it in the market. Women are faced with a new situation where they have intervened in the market and fight for their rights against market forces. The market is designed in such a way that only those who have money and muscle power can survive there. Fisher women with none of these powers, however, are surviving in the field because of their united actions and struggles against the unjust market forces.

The injustices suffered by the fisher women can be summarised as follows:

- They are forced to play the major role for the domestic economic survival as men lost their traditional role due to modernization of the fish production process.
- They are denied entry in the market.
- They are denied basic infrastructures like sheds, tables, chairs, iceboxes etc. and other facilities such as drinking water, toilets, and place for changing dress etc. in the market.
- They are brutally exploited by middlemen, moneylenders etc.
- Often they are being physically attacked by goondas of the market contractor.

A document of the Department of women and children: Ministry of Human Resource Development says: *“There is very little information on the impact of globalisation on women’s work in the informal sector. There are sporadic reports of fisherwomen losing jobs due to the entry multinational fishing trawlers, or traditional leather industry not able to stand in competition with modern companies with foreign collaborations etc, but no systematic studies are available”*.

### **THE INLAND FISHERWOMEN**

The negative impacts of globalization were a deathblow on the fisher women in general, and particularly on the inland fisher women. Its consequences were evident from 1991 onwards when a deadly fish disease (Epizootic Ulcerative Syndrome) spread out through out the inland fishing sector. It is disease, which destroys the immune system of the fish. The public stopped buying fish and which led to acute poverty and starvation in the

fishing community. Fisher women even attempted suicide and one woman succeeded in doing so in Changanacherry. During such periods they depend on the middlemen and moneylenders for survival and end up in an eternal debt trap. The authorities did not take any steps to contain the situation and therefore the inland fish workers were thrown in to agitation. They organized a march towards the official residence of the fisheries minister with basketful of fish and demanded immediate relief provisions. Women and children were in majority who participated in the protest march. The minister invited them for a discussion on the next day in which the minister declared Rs.150/- as compensation for every fish vendor.

In order to buy fish from the big contractors women have to wake up by three o'clock in the morning and rush to the spot. Due to this routine, their sleeping hours are completely disturbed and end up in serious health problems. The inland fishing sector faces yet another serious problem of losing their work place. The encroachment by the shipbuilding yard in Vembanad Lake is one such example. Private encroachments such as tourist resorts, industries and city modification projects are destroying the lakes with an unprecedented time phase. Due to the irrational filling of the lakes an original area of 222000 hectare of waterbed is now reduced to 56000 hectare. In fact whatever projects come in the name of development destroy the natural habitat of the lake and cause serious threat to the livelihood and existence of the inland fishing community. This sort of massive displacement and destruction of work place create serious socio-economic problems in the community.

Migration of other work forces to inland fishing sector is also another problem. For example when the ferry workers and coir workers, lost their jobs, they migrated to inland sector which created competition in a limited area of work place. As a result of the loss of access to production women had to venture out in the market. In addition to their domestic responsibilities fisher women had to face an additional burden. Even in the market place the inland fisher women are treated as second-class citizens. They complain that they are being pushed away to the corners and not allowed to sell the fish in a decent clean place.

MNCs (Multi National Corporations) like Walmart are another emerging threat to the traditional fish sellers. They are entering in to the market in a big way with all the technological back ups and capturing the business very fast. With the emergence of local merchants and the MNCs in fish marketing, the traditional fish workers, particularly the fisher women face unprecedented challenges in the area of livelihood and income generation. *“In order to solve these challenges, new strategies have to be worked out on the basis of research that can create changes in the production sector and market”*: Vincent Benedict, a social worker observed.

### **THEERADESA MAHILA VEDI**

The independent traditional fish worker’s unions in the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Ernakulam and Kozhikode were actively in the struggle front during the 70’s. Later these unions were merged under the banner of Kerala Swathanthra Matsyathozhilali Federation (KSMTF), which started spearheading the agitation from the beginning of 1980 onwards demanding the ban of trawling during the months of June, July and August. The fish workers struggle that attracted tremendous media attention was considered to be historical in Kerala’s socio-political context due to its dynamism and independent nature. The federation dissociated with any political party affiliation and stood independently. Agitations that rocked the entire stretch of Kerala eventually forced the government to ban trawling in the Kerala coast, which turned out to be in favour of traditional fish workers. Although men constituted the leadership of the federation, women formed the backbone of all agitations, as they turned up in thousands, whether for demonstration, dharna or picketing. But the traditional values of gender bias existed even in a non-partisan organisation like KSMTF at least in its initial phase. However, it is to be noted that KSMTF is probably the only organisation, which tried to bring together other indigenous, and working classes including women in various political struggles in Kerala.

The women activists of the federation raised this issue as a serious concern that generated many deliberations among the leadership. Subsequently by the end of 1980s they decided to form a women’s wing of the federation named as Theeradesa Mahila Vedi. Since then

the organisation was actively involved in various issues of women and spearheaded many historical agitations that even influenced and changed the policies of the government. Initially the activities of the organisation was centred around Thiruvananthapuram district and later on spread over to Kollam, Ernakulam, Kozhikode and the inland fishing sectors of Alappuzha, Kollam, Mavelikkara and Pathanamthitta.

Four major action areas constitute the history of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi.

- Direct actions/agitations.
- Activities/agitations in collaboration with other organisations.
- New initiatives such as starting different women's forums/networks.
- Involvement in the agitations and other activities of KSMTF.

The direct actions /agitations of the organisation come under the following areas.

- The mobility factor; the issue of transportation.
- The livelihood issues of women related to market and fish processing plants.
- The issue of sexual harassment.
- Family and related problems.
- Child trafficking.
- Environment/tourism related issues.
- The organisation of women's co-operatives.
- The political involvement through local self-government, people's planning and general elections.

This article will mainly focus on the direct involvements and agitations that were taken up by the organisation; however it will touch upon briefly on the other areas too.

### **STRUGGLE FOR SPECIAL BUSES**

Lack of transportation was a major impediment that the fish selling women were facing during the 80s. They were not allowed to travel in the public transport vehicles with their fish baskets and other utensils. They had to walk miles and miles to reach the market or to get back to their homes. Some times they had to wait long hours to catch a vehicle to reach the market and this had become a major problem with regard to their livelihood

activities. In fact there were also incidents of fisher women being pushed out of public transport buses causing serious injuries. The attitude of the mainstream community towards the fisherwomen was one of contempt, which aggravated their marginalization. Most often they get back home late at night by walking with a heavy load on their shoulders.

Serious discussions were initiated on this issue among different groups within the community and some NGOs who supported them from outside. PCO (Programme for Community Organisation), an NGO involved in the coastal region conducted a survey to assess the intensity of the problem with the help of the Mahila Samajams in different coastal villages, namely Thumba, Vizhinjam, Veli, Vettukadu, Pallithura, Poonthura etc. Aliyamma Vijayan, Sheela Rozario and Mercy Alexander headed the survey team. The findings of the survey undoubtedly proved that the demand by the fisherwomen for better transport facilities was genuine. Eventually Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, Thiruvananthapuram district decided to launch a struggle against this injustice. They organized strong protest march, dharnas, picketing etc. from the early 1980s that resulted in mass arrests and forced detentions. Blocking the public transport vehicles, Govt. department vehicles, picketing of Thampanoor bus stand, dharna in front of secretariat and fishermen welfare corporation office etc. were some of the strategies adopted and which went on for almost four to five years until the government was forced to take a decision in favour of fisherwomen. As the struggle gained intensity in 1981 the then ruling LDF government realising the plight of fisherwomen and the strength of the protests succumbed to the demands of the protesters. The government initially sanctioned three special buses for the fisherwomen to travel in between the markets in the city and their homes. The routes, Veli to the city, Vettukadu through Valiathura to the city and Vizhinjam to the city, were convenient for the women to move around but the limited number of buses retained the issue in its severity. Later, buses were sanctioned in places like Anchuthengu, Neendakara etc. There were two trips on everyday; one at 6'o clock and another one at 9'o clock in the morning. Initially the government permitted the fisherwomen to travel in the buses on a reasonable charge, directed by the fisheries minister, since the fisheries department could avail many subsidies from the central

government. Later on the fisherwomen decided to share a part as ticket charge. In 1991 the UDF government decided to keep these buses under the control of Matsyafed, an apex body of different co-operative societies. Although Matsyafed was entrusted the responsibility of running the show, the government did not allocate any fund for this. Naturally this led to malfunctions of the bus operation, which in turn created severe conflicts between fisherwomen and Matsyafed. Partisan political interests in the decision making process of Matsyafed also accelerated the conflict between both parties. Its interest was purely business in nature that resulted in charge hikes, canceling trips, lack of maintenance and commissioning no new buses. Discarded buses from KSRTC and VSSC were used for trips after a little bit of maintenance. The buses were not insured and when some accidents happened the fisherwomen could not claim any compensation. During off-season in the Thiruvananthapuram coast the women had to travel up to Neendakara by lorry or tempo van to collect fish for sale. This was an additional burden in terms of money and time. Once again Theeradesa Mahila Vedi took up the issue and organized struggles demanding to increase the number of buses. The administration had to agree to the demands of the women and sanctioned three additional bus routes, which included two trips to Neendakara. The fisherwomen were always vigilant regarding the malfunctioning of the bus transportation and organized struggles whenever a need arose. Accordingly several protests had been organized in front of the offices of Matsyafed, fisheries minister and the secretariat on several occasions even during night. Theeradesa Mahila Vedi finally decided to constitute village committees of fisherwomen who travel by bus in order to be vigilant on issues related to bus operation and organize necessary action without delay. Committees were formed in Vizhinjam, Vettukadu, Poonthura, Veli, Kochuveli, Kannanthura and Thoppu. Ever since these committees were constituted several agitations were organized that showed the sheer courage and political will of these women.

The latest in the series was a massive agitation in 2004 against the Matsyafed authorities for their negligence and callousness regarding the bus operation. Approximately more than 500 fisherwomen picketed the office for several hours and resisted arrest. The officers and other staff were literally detained inside the office until they showed

willingness to discuss the issue. It was agreed by both parties that the bus charges would be increased up to 10% only in three years despite the hike of diesel charge. A committee was also formed comprising the representatives from Matsyafed and fisherwomen to look after the issues that may arise in the future. Magline Peter who led this protest says, *“We know our women are politically conscious. That’s why they are able to show tremendous energy and courage in the phase of agitations.”*

Freesca Kurisappan, a veteran fisherwoman leader puts the outcome of the struggle in a correct perspective: *“After this whole issue of transportation was resolved to a certain extent, the family life of our women had drastically changed. Now they are able to get back home in the afternoon and find time to look after the domestic activities and the needs of their children and husbands. Their health also had been substantially improved which in turn gave them more energy to be available to the family. Peace prevails in place of discord of early days.”*

As a result of this historic struggle and the awareness campaign by the fisherwomen, many organizations and even some Panchayats had started exclusive bus routes for women. In Kadinamkulam Panchayat, the women members namely Jennet and Freesca, who are also members of the fisherwomen movement, had taken a firm stand to move the Panchayat committee in favor of availing better transport facilities for women. Freesca says that men do not display any concern on women’s issues of this sort. Women should initiate and lead the struggle till the end, she says. A substantial number of fisher women are now using this transport facility in Thiruvananthapuram district.

### **FISH MARKETS RECAPTURED**

Because of a lack of efficient fisheries management measures, the natural resource base of most of the women's economic activities in the field of fish marketing and processing is threatened. At the same time, marketing and processing of fish is still carried out using traditional methods and technologies while innovative marketing and processing methods which would make more efficient use of a scarce natural resource are presently hardly

being used. The major issues related to market and fish vending can be summarised as follows:

- Harassment from male fish vendors, contractors and tax collectors.
- Selling fish in very unhygienic places.
- Lack of basic infrastructures like sheds and other facilities like table, chairs, toilets, and room to change dress, iceboxes and drinking water.
- Brutal exploitation by middlemen, moneylenders etc.
- Physical attacks by goondas of the market contractor.
- Rape and other forms of Sexual violence

Women in fishing communities in central and south Kerala participate substantially in most of the basically household managed fishery and fishery related enterprises. They are particularly involved in fish processing and marketing. However, their social role and participation in decision making at the village and local administration level is rather limited. It can be only through social organization, social awareness training, micro-enterprise development and access to institutional credit, women's social and economic role could be considerably enhanced. Economic progress could be achieved through economic and social development. Although women comprise about half of the population, their role in development is not significant because of lack of empowerment and political organisation. Fisherwomen are generally engaged in marketing but their social status remains poor. Schemes for providing micro-credit to women through credit institutions could not make much headway in promoting their status for several reasons. Besides their domestic chores, they perform the difficult function of selling a highly perishable commodity like fish in most of the coastal villages where chilling and freezing facilities are least available. Their business is a story of fluctuating fortunes.

Big contractors and merchants who enjoy unholy political connections or even play proxy to political leaders mostly run fish markets. The coastal as well as inland fisherwomen depend on these markets to sell the fish, which they buy from other contractors. By the advent of globalization, mechanisation became the buzzword and out board engines for

fishing boats became popular everywhere. As a result a drastic reduction of human resource was needed for fishing and many men lost their jobs. Unemployed and without other skills, these men started indulging in irresponsible activities like drinking liquor, gambling etc. Consequently women were forced to earn an income to satisfy the domestic needs and other unexpected expenses. Traditionally women used to get their fish for sale from the catch brought in by their husbands or relatives. But today the picture is different; they have to travel miles and miles for gathering fish; get up very early in the morning; rushing through one catch centre to another and disgracefully depending on the contractor to get their due. More over globalisation created a great divide between men and women with regard to their access to modern facilities. Men have access to most of the technological gadgets like mobile phones, two-wheelers, boxes to carry fish etc. They are able to get quick information about the availability of fish and price rates from any coast at any time using their mobile phones. But women have no access to these facilities due to economical and cultural reasons.

The physical conditions and infrastructural facilities in the fish markets are pathetic everywhere in Kerala. It is a general viewpoint that fish markets are unhygienic places. Although women comprise the major part of fish sellers in the markets, they are unjustly denied whatever little amenities provided in the market. The blatant gender discrimination is a common factor; women are allocated the dirtiest and unnoticed corners of the markets; they are denied basic infrastructural facilities such as toilets, room for changing the dress, water pipes, pure drinking water, ice boxes or freezers and a table to keep the fish for sale. Often they are being harassed and even physically tortured by the goondas appointed by the contractors to collect the rent from the sellers.

The problem was blatant in terms of gender discrimination and hence demanded a different political strategy for agitation. Women leaders like Freesca Kurisappan, Magline Peter, Sophy Yesudasan, Pushparani, Girly John and many others were entrusted to collect data from each market ranging from Anchuthengu to Poovar. They conducted a market study with the help of Centre for Development Studies and brought forth a report. PCO did another market survey, which revealed the seriousness of the issue.

Based on these findings Theeradesa Mahila Vedi conducted several consultations and meetings with the government officials which did not make any positive results. In this context the organization decided to take up the issue one by one and started with Sreekaryam panchayat market. The objective was to convert the market as a model market. The organization sought the collaboration of the Panchayat members and officials of fisheries department and Matsyafed to make it realized and during 1989-'90 many consultations were held in this regard. This consistent effort did bear fruit that they were able to provide the basic facilities in the market, which eventually became a model for other markets.

Construction of the market was the primary objective. Following the example of Sreekaryam the organization then took up the issue of construction of other markets in the Corporation area, namely, Chala, Peroorkada, Palayam, Petta, Kazhakkootam and Poonthura with the concerned authorities. Consultations and agitations went on simultaneously that forced the authorities finally to come in terms with the demands of fisherwomen. Under people's planning project the Corporation decided to construct sheds in the markets where women could sell their fish. The average cost of construction of each market came around Rs.25 to 27 lakhs. Although sheds were built and other facilities provided, lack of proper maintenance and follow up created the situation even worse. Once again the fisherwomen were thrown in to agitation demanding proper maintenance of the market that includes shed, water pipes, toilets etc.

Following were some of the agitations held on the issue of market in different part of the Corporation of Thiruvananthapuram:

- Pangodu market – 1989-'90; this is a wholesale market from where fisherwomen collect fish for sale. Most of the fisherwomen in Thiruvananthapuram city used to reach the market by 3.30 in the morning for the auction so that they could collect fish from there for selling it in and around the city. Fish theft and physical attack on the fisherwomen by goondas were the issues here, which needed immediate attention. Also, they were cheated in terms of the quantity and quality of the fish

because the fish boxes were kept in the lorry while the auction was in progress. As soon as the fish boxes are unloaded the goondas used to grab handfuls of fish from it by force and disappear. In order to tackle this problem a committee comprising agents and fisherwomen was formed that convened many discussions and demanded that the auction should be conducted only after 6 in the morning and the goonda menace ought to be put to an end. The committee then met the Police Commissioner with these demands on which he acted immediately by sanctioning police surveillance from 5 to 7 in the morning. This was an example of using the democratic means of both consultation and agitation on field to solve a problem with people's participation.

- Kazhakkootam market - 1998-'99; the protesters were demanding the construction of shed, place to sit and sell the fish, water pipe connection, and toilet facility etc.
- Mavelikkara market – 2001; this is the market where around 40 inland fisher women sell fish. They complain that the facilities in the market are very inadequate that they are destined to sell fish in a very unhygienic surrounding. The contractor who auctioned the market was least concerned about this situation; on the contrary he increased the tax up to Rs.30/-per day per person. Even on holidays when there was no market, women were forced to pay the tax. Physical attacks and destroying the fish by the goondas of the contractor were common on those who refused to pay the unfair tax amount. The women complained about these atrocities to the contractor but he did not show much interest in it. Even if he forwarded the complaint to the police it would be a diluted version of the original one. This was the context the fisherwomen realized that they have to stand together to face these injustices. They contacted the leaders of KSMTF and requested them to intervene. In collaboration with KSMTF the fisherwomen organized a number of agitations that forced the municipal authorities and police to take immediate action. After many consultation the contractor agreed to reduce the tax tariff to Rs.18/- In the following year the municipality directly started the tax collection and the amount was further reduced to Rs.13/- The next year, again another contractor appeared on the scene but he could not continue the tax

collection due to the firm stand of the fisherwomen paying only Rs.13/- as tax amount. Finally the contractor handed over the control of the market and the responsibility of tax collection to the fisherwomen's committee and KSMTF. Ever since these two organizations are managing the market that have resulted in better work conditions and basic facilities. KSMTF inland leader Rajan Lazar, Rosamma Thomas, and Santhamma Divakaran were behind this historical struggle of recapturing the market.

- Sreekaryam Panchayat market – 2001; Around 50 women participated in the protest demanding action against the criminals who tried to molest two women from Veli when they were selling fish in Sreekaryam market. –. The government immediately intervened and arrested the culprits.
- Manakkadu market – 2004; The women used to sell fish till 2 o'clock at night and often they were being attacked by goondas and police to grab money from them. Once the fisherwomen were blocked and prevented to sell fish following a complaint forwarded by a nearby medical shopkeeper. Workers of many political parties, police, Health department officials and corporation authorities were on the spot asking the fisherwomen to stop selling fish on the wayside. Some even sprinkled kerosene over the fish that destroyed the entire lot. This generated strong protest from fisherwomen that they stood firm on their decision to continue selling fish there itself. Fiery arguments were exchanged between the two parties and finally both the parties agreed upon a dispute settlement meeting. On the next day the aggrieved party did not turn up for the meeting and the dispute went unattended. Mahila Vedi joining with KSMTF organized many protest against these atrocities that invited stringent actions from the police authorities.
- In 2005 a similar conflict was emerged in Kesavadasapuram when fisherwomen selling fish and vegetable vendors on the wayside were asked to clear off the place in the name of '*clean city; green city*'. This time the complaint was forwarded by a police officer who was residing nearby. Since it was a complaint by a police officer all the official machinery moved fast and the fish baskets and other things were forcefully captured and removed from the spot. This had become a frequent exercise and the conflict remained unanswered. Theeradesa

Mahila Vedi organized strong protests against these ill treatments on wayside fish vendors and vegetable sellers. On one occasion they marched towards the corporation office carrying fish baskets on their heads and demanded fair dealings and their right to sell fish on the waysides. The agitators were arrested and taken to the Museum police station. Finally the corporation Mayor intervened and assured them that they can continue selling fish on the wayside at Kesavadasapuram.

- In April 2006 the Fisherwomen protested in front of the secretariat day and night for five days. Only after the Government gave an assurance the protest was called off.

Besides the agitations for the construction of markets and availing basic facilities for fisherwomen, the organization then had to take up the issue of unfair tax collection by the contractors who were legally authorized to do the job. The tax was collected on the basis of square foot area used; however the tax tariff was invariably fraudulent and unfair. Physical attacks and destroying the fish were common if the fish selling women refused to pay this unjust tax. These contractors and tax collectors enjoyed improper political connections and were usually men of the ruling party so that they could dictate terms using their money and muscle power. Nevertheless the fisherwomen did not budge and started reacting to these incidents, which eventually took off in the shape of a massive agitation. Protests were organized in all the markets demanding fair tariff and a halt to violence and other atrocities. After many consultations in different levels among the contractors, officials and fisherwomen the tariff rates were reasonably cut down and the women were assured safety and protection inside the market premise. As usual violations do take place but today the women are more vigilant and politically conscious than ever. As an attempt to gain control of the market the fish selling women of some markets tried to participate in the auction process but were strategically thwarted by the contractors.

Today the market committees, comprising the fisherwomen and the representatives of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, are very active and vigilant that they take up issues as and when it is occurred. They are frequently in touch with the officials and report if there is any

need to be attended immediately. Thanks to the prolonged struggles and dialogues initiated by Theeradesa Mahila Vedi that the conditions in the markets are by and large satisfactory.

Although the conditions in the markets improved for better, the gender discrimination still exist that the ideal places in the markets, modern technological facilities and freedom of movement are accessible only to men. Following the onslaught of globalization and the massive exodus after the Kuwait and Iraq war hundreds of men have migrated to the fish markets, initially as head load workers or agents and later on as fish vendors. They in a short span of time took hold the control of the markets which resulted in massive displacement of fisherwomen. Consequently, today, majority of women sell fish outside the markets, on a door-to-door delivery system. This is a challenge, which the organization needs to address immediately or at least in the near future.

### **VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST FISHERWOMEN**

Violence and sexual harassment against fisherwomen are on the increase due to various domestic and social factors. A document of the Department of women and children: Ministry of Human Resource Development says: *“The annual publication of National Crime Record Bureau is the only source of available information on atrocities against women and children in the country. It is the general perception that these reports do not fully capture the ground realities, since a large number of crimes against women and are not reported. Some of the recent reports of UNCHR, ICRW, and Amnesty International etc have shown a large vacuum in the available information base on the subject. It may be worthwhile to commission a few studies in some select areas to assess the magnitude of crime committed against women, both within the family and outside, to find out the extent to which these get reported in the formal system and the various constraints in the delivery of justice. Studies can also sponsor to develop indicators to measure gender based violence”*.

The case with the fisherwomen does substantiate this observation. Many of the domestic violence are not even considered as violence against women and sexual harassments are

not reported due to fear of social stigma. On the other hand the cases which are reported to the police do not get serious attention or follow up and eventually the culprit escapes using political influences or threatening the victims for dire consequences. Theeradesa Mahila Vedi was aware of this dreadful situation and decided to take up issues of violence and sexual harassment against fisherwomen on the domestic as well as social circumstances.

There were several instances of violence and sexual harassment, which the organization took up to the agitation front and managed to book the culprits.

- In 1987 Baby, a fisherwoman from Pulluvila was tortured and killed by her husband. Mahila Vedi took up the issue and started an agitation, which resulted in the arrest and detention of the criminal. The body was exhumed and postmortem was done again after the agitation.
- In 1989 one such case was happened in the Palayam market. Sharlet, a pregnant fisherwoman from Vettukadu was attacked inside the market by a porter when she refused to give him fish for free of charge. She fell down during the commotion and was brutally beaten up by him resulting in abortion and a long period of hospitalization. Mahila Vedi went for a big fight against this inhuman act using several means of protest like poster campaign, protest march, legal procedures etc. Finally the culprit got arrested and detained for four years.
- In 1997 Fazila, a union worker who resides in Perumathura was arrested from the KSRTC bus stand on false charges of immoral trafficking. She was locked up in the police station and tortured for two day and night. Mahila Vedi activists under the leadership of Mercy Alexander and Magline Peter immediately went on action and staged protest march in front of the secretariat. Around 300 women participated in the agitation demanding the immediate release of Fazila. Eventually the police released her from the lock up agreeing that they mistook the person.
- In 1998 some criminals sexually tortured a girl child of twelve year old and Mahila Vedi took up the issue and launched an agitation in front of the secretariat.

Following the agitation and subsequent consultations the authorities took stringent action against the culprits.

- In 2000 a gang of criminals stormed in to Pongumoodu market, threatened the shopkeepers with knives and got the shops closed. Then they abducted a fisherwoman by name Flory, who comes from Veli, took her to a remote destination and raped. The other women who were with her in the market immediately went to the police station and filed a complaint. Sensing the indifferent attitude of the police these women approached Magline peter and other activists of the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi and urged them to act urgently. Suspicion was mounting that the gangsters might have killed the woman. The women activists immediately contacted the police and cautioned them of dire consequences if something untoward happened to the woman. Not feeling comfortable with the police investigation they contacted the city police commissioner who took up the case with a personal interest. He directly went to the concerned police station, got convinced of the casualness of the police in this issue which resulted in the suspension of two police officers with immediate effect. Then he alerted the flying squad and other forces for rapid action to find the woman and after an hour and a half they could find her in a remote place. The woman had to undergo treatment for several days before she recovered completely. Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, then, went on a strong agitation including police station march demanding the arrest of the culprit and as a result they were arrested and detained within 45 days of their remand period itself. This agitation enhanced the confidence level of the fisherwomen to fight with tooth and nail and made them ever vigilant and gender conscious.

All these agitations were organized and followed up by women leaders namely, Mercy Alexander, Magline Peter, Freesca Kurisappan, Leenamma Jose, Seeta Dasan, Elizabeth Antony, Pushpam Antony, Philo Varghese, Laila Aliyarkunju, Sr. Philammine Mary, Mariam Francis, Mable Nasian, Margrate Francis, Mary Herman, Girly John, Rajamma Cleetus, Chinna Joseph, Baby Mercy , Shanthamma Divakaran, Mary John and Shyannama in collaboration with the leadership of KSMTF.

A study on the gender profile of Kerala states: *“Despite the high level of literacy and general awareness among the people of Kerala, violence against women is widely prevalent and is a matter of serious social concern. Ghastly crimes against women like dowry deaths, of course, do not generally take place in the State. The State’s contribution to crimes against women is less than 4% of the All India average, though, the crime rate of total cognizable crimes in the State is more than the All India average ñ about 15% as against 14% for All India (999). Rape, kidnapping and abduction, cruelty by husbands and relatives, molestation and offences under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act are the more frequently occurring crimes against women in the State. In terms of absolute numbers, the largest numbers of crimes against women are accounted for by cruelty by husbands and relatives, and molestation. These two categories of offences constitute 94% of all crimes against women. Though, sexual harassment against women does not significantly feature in the official crime records, it does remain a problem in Kerala. This is reflected in the level of awareness about this problem among women. According to SAKSHI, a Delhi based NGO, more than 90% of working women in Kerala are aware of sexual harassment in the work place (the highest level of awareness among all States).”*

Magline Peter says: *“Today our women are more vigilant and conscious about all kinds of violence and sexual harassment against them. They have grown in confidence and have the courage to fight till the end. They also have developed the capacity to deal with the officials and police.”*

## **OTHER STRUGGLES**

In 1992 the fisherwomen with the support of fish workers union started an agitation in front of the secretariat demanding inclusion of fisherwomen in to the incentive scheme (a financial help of Rs.1050/- shared by three parties; central government, state government and fish workers) during the famine stricken months and insurance scheme for accident deaths. They put up thatched huts on the pavements in front of the secretariat, cooked food and slept there. The agitation went on for 15 days forcing the government to succumb to their demands. The government decided to include women also in the famine

incentive scheme and insurance scheme. From a practical experience women knew that a male member of a family would not share the whole amount for domestic purposes. But a female member, they believe, would definitely share the entire amount with the family. Besides this, an important rationale behind their demand was that they also being recognized as fish workers. Accepting fisherwomen as fish workers had definitely enhanced their social and economic status. It is mandatory that they need to become a member of the welfare fund and deposit Rs.50 per annum to avail any kind of financial support from the government.

The draft fisheries policy of Kerala government notes: *“It will be ensured that only actual fishermen are included in the annual list of fishermen prepared by the Fishermen's Welfare Fund Board. Complaints have been received that people engaged in other professions register themselves as fishermen to obtain the benefits extended to fishermen. In this context, the Welfare Fund Board will be asked to publicise the draft list before finalising it at major points and the fishermen will be asked over newspapers, radio and television to bring to the notice of the authorities if they find that anybody engaged in other professions are included in the list. If any ineligible persons are included in the list, their names will be removed from the list and action will be taken against the officers responsible. All fishermen will be supplied with identification cards with photographs at Government cost. This will help in ensuring that ineligible people do not get the benefits meant for fishermen.”*

It is interesting to note that the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation moved prior to the government in including the fisherwomen in the famine incentive scheme. In 1992 the Corporation with Mr. V. Sivankutty as its Mayor took a decision in this line under its people's planning project. Leaders like Magline Peter were members of the Fish Workers Development Committee under people's planning project took strong stand in implementing the scheme and the corporation agreed to share a part with fish workers to realize the proposal. Consequently other coastal Panchayats also fell in line and implemented the scheme. Follow up agitations were organized in several occasions when government showed negligence in executing these schemes. Initially, only the coastal

fisherwomen were included in the scheme. This triggered a series of agitation by the inland fisherwomen demanding their inclusion also into the scheme.

## **STRUGGLES IN COLLABORATION WITH OTHER ORGANISATION**

Theeradesa Mahila Vedi was always in the forefront of agitations, which were organized in collaboration with other like-minded organizations. It actively took part in the Adivasi land struggle led by C.K.Janu, environment protection struggles by different environment groups, Anti coca-cola struggle in Plachimada, Narmada struggle, Bamboo workers agitation, anti liquor culture/liquor mafia struggle and protests against violence and sexual harassment towards women. It also networks with organizations like Sewa, Sthreevedi etc that are involved exclusively in women's issues.

The women's wing of Malabar region, Malabar Theeradesa Vanitha Federation, also has a long history of struggles that have enhanced the empowerment of women in the social, economical and political fields. The leadership of K.P Safia, Victoria, C.K Zeenath, Nafiza, Soudha Aziz, and many others has made successful impacts on various struggles that they have spearheaded, like the agitation against forced eviction of fishing families in Nainanvalappu, many protests against violence and sexual harassments on women etc. A detailed documentation of the activities and agitations of Malabar Theeradesa Vanitha Federation will be presented in the forthcoming study on fisherwomen.

Over the years similar struggles were organized also in Ernakulam and Kollam. In Ernakulam the struggles were organized on issues like drinking water and the problem of liquor. Chinna Joseph, Jiji Antony, Mani Gopi were the leaders of the protest. Similarly in Kollam, struggles, including collectorate march were organized on issues like drinking water, liquor and fish vendors' problems under the leadership of Victoria John, Vialot Ciril, Veronika Antony, A.Nirmala, Alphonsa Clement and Mable Jose of Theeradesa Mahila Society. They also organized march and dharna in front of the Water Authority Office demanding immediate steps to solve the drinking water problem and protests in front of the liquor shops to end the liquor menace.

## **POST TSUNAMI SCENARIO**

The women and children were the worst affected during Tsunami that swept coastal South India on December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004. In Kerala districts of Alappuzha, Kollam and Ernakulam were the worst hit. The public hearing which was held at Thiruvananthapuram on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> May 2005 on post Tsunami relief and rehabilitation challenges and response brought in to sharp focus that women and children are the most vulnerable in any disaster. It observed that following the Tsunami; the feminisation of poverty has been further deepened. Women's traditional means of livelihood of selling fish and other allied occupation now stands completely destroyed. Following the loss of their men and livelihood in the disaster, these women are the worst affected and not yet able to assume their traditional occupation. There were also testimonies of compensation package not reaching these affected women as the relatives of their husbands are claiming them and these women are being thrown out from their homes.

Both the participants and the Jury panel equally shared the fear that given the prevailing socio-cultural context lack of such safety provisions would lead these women into the danger of sex work and trafficking. In many places women are subjected to sexual abuse and violence. Both men and women have been affected by the tsunami disaster, but differently due to gender differences and gender roles in society. The implications of these differences must be properly understood and integrated into the recovery measures. Women's involvement and their specific concerns must be enlisted in the assessment and programming stages for recovery.

After tsunami struck Alappad coast, the Alappad Theeradesa Mahila members Magline Peter, Mary John, Shanthamma Divakaran and Ponni swung into action helping the people. Their contribution was noteworthy.

The final report of the "People's Tribunal" on Post Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Challenges and Response, organised under the banner "Voices from the Margins" a coalition of Fishworkers organisations, trade unions, concerned activists, relief workers, and mass organisations from the states of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Kerala at the Mannam Memorial Hall, Trivandrum on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> May 2005 states:

*“The governments have failed to recognize that women’s rights are Human Rights. By and large women were not recognized as claimants for compensation. In fact, many women were working independently either in small-scale shops or as labourers in farms etc. were not included in the Tsunami hit list. So also since women were not recognized as individuals with Human Right, they are the worst sufferers as mentioned above, under the heading “Right to Shelter”.*

*From time immemorial, fishermen go for fishing in the early morning and come back with their fish at around 8 am. On the shore the women with children await for their men to bring the fish and it is usually the responsibility of the women folk to process and market the fish. The children used to play happily on the beach from time to time. Available information on the loss of lives clearly explicates that the killer waves claimed more women and children.*

*From the testimonies presented at the Public Hearing we can ascertain that Women faced the maximum problems after the Tsunami. The temporary shelters had no room for privacy and no space between the shelters. The sanitation facilities such as bathing spaces and latrine were very bad and were not usable in some cases. Life in the relief camps has been found to be a source of continued trauma for women. Separate toilets, recreation space, cooking sheds, firewood storage facilities, place for drying clothes and space for cleaning kitchen utensils have been identified as the major areas of concern for women. Nevertheless, given the dominant norms of socialization, women are hesitant to push for or even express their needs, and silently cope with several problems, including sexual and physical harassment by men in the camps, particularly near the toilets.*

*There are problems related to women’s health needs – pregnant and lactating mothers do not get adequate nutrition or healthcare facilities, inadequate supplies of water and sanitation make women susceptible to reproductive and urinary tract infections, and often women and girls do not go for medical check ups organized in the relief camps as the doctors are all male, and the facilities lack in privacy. In the economic sphere, women are being put at risk of sexual exploitation and dependency because of the loss of*

*income and the inability to access cash. Orphaned girls are being married off at young ages by relatives or community members who do not want the responsibility of taking care of them. The vulnerability of women has been further accentuated by gender-insensitive relief and rehabilitation policies. Women's work has not been recognized in most rehabilitation programs. Women typically were involved in processing and marketing of fish, or in non-fishing jobs like collecting shells or running food stalls. They rarely owned property or any assets, and were usually employed in the informal sector. Livelihood rehabilitation measures have focused on the fishing sector and related loss of boats, thus ignoring the livelihood issues of women. Often relief and rehabilitation packages have been issued based on lists made by the Fisher folk Panchayats, which are turf of men, with the result that women have not had access to relief measures at all.*

*This blatant disregard for women's livelihood concerns could prove disastrous among the poor, because many of these women may well be the sole earners in their families. In any case it is widely known that women's earnings generally go directly towards meeting the basic needs of their families, while a substantial proportion of many men's earnings is often spent on personal habits such as drinking, smoking and gambling. In fact, fishing being a seasonal occupation, women's livelihood activities are critical to the household economy. The situation of widows, single elderly women, of destitute women and of families with women heads is particularly risky in this context, as they simply may not receive the assistance required to survive and rebuild their lives.*

*In situations where women do get compensation and relief packages, it is being seen that relatives try to take over and dominate, in an effort to divert the money to themselves. Proper economic counseling and guidance is required to avoid this. Women have also had problems accessing relief measures, including rations and compensation, as families, properties/assets and papers are usually registered in the man's name.*

*As the experiences till date show, it is vital that gender-disaggregated information be collected before determining relief and rehabilitation packages. Protection of women from sexual exploitation and the prevention of creation of dependencies are of prime*

*importance, but at the same time, it is important that women are perceived as citizens with specific perspectives, and not as vulnerable victims. Women's livelihoods must be prioritized and earning opportunities must be made available to them. The long-term impact of the change in gender balance must be considered in the formulation of all policies and programs, with the view of promoting women's rights and protecting their interests".*

The women leaders and activists of the fish worker's movement were actively involved in the relief and rehabilitation work, which took off soon after the disaster. They stayed day and night in the villages, organized several awareness campaigns and formed village level committees to monitor the relief and rehabilitation activities. Negotiating with the authorities was a hectic task and these enthusiastic women with the leadership of Magline Peter managed that. The work is going on even today as the Tsunami affected people were not given due relief, compensation and rehabilitation by the government.

#### **WOMEN'S DAY DECLARATION**

For the past several years Theeradesa Mahila Vedi celebrates the Women's Day on March 8th with various programmes and activities. In the year 2000 the day was observed as the Declaration of Rights day by fisherwomen jointly organized by Theeradesa Mahila Vedi and KSMTF. This effort was an outcome of the Mahila Vedi to resist exploitative practices and injustices that the fisherwomen were subjected to. The middlemen and moneylenders grab their hard earned income illegally in the markets in different ways. The fisherwomen do not have the basic amenities in the domestic local markets. The slave-like treatment towards the fisherwomen and negligence to consider them as a working class necessitates organizing themselves to assert their rights. This is the background of the formation of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi and subsequent agitations and observation of Women's Day etc.

About 1000 fisherwomen took part in this effort heralding their strength and vigour. As part of this programme, the woman took out a march from the Martyr's Complex at Palayam, Thiruvananthapuram to the government secretariat. This was followed by a

public conference and cultural programme. Baby Mercy, Sophy Yesudasan, Girly John, Leenamma, Magline Peter, Brijit James and Freesca Kurisappan led the march. Mega human chain was organized twice around the secretariat as part of women's day observation on some other years.

The Declaration of Rights by fisherwomen contained 17 demands. The prelude to the Declaration of Rights was a pledge that stated: *“We, the fisherwomen are obliged to protect our work and work place. To deny our livelihood is equal to the denial of our rights to live. We will jointly resist any attempt to deny justice, attempt to exploit and the inhuman treatment. We hereby swear that we will try our level best to protect the fish resource and will try to ensure the availability of better fish to the consumers through traditional marketing system. We swear that we will fight against those who neglect our basic problems and stand to safeguard our self esteem and pride as a working class”.*

### **Declaration of Rights by Fisherwomen**

Traditional occupation of fish vending is destroyed by the mismanagement of the so-called 'development' process. The income earned by the fish vending women has been the main source of livelihood in the families of fishing communities. There has been an increase in exploitative practices in this field denying the rights of fisherwomen. The exploiters consider the silent suffering of the fisherwomen as their weakness and this has now become quite unbearable. We have to assert our rights as a working class. As an emerging organized working class under the auspices of the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, from the hitherto unorganized level, we hereby declare the following rights and demands.

1. Provide transportation facilities to fish vending women in all villages.
2. Provide separate bogey in all shuttled trains for fish vending women like that of Kollam-Thiruvananthapuram route.
3. Provide financial assistance to fish vending women if accidents occur during the course of their occupation.

4. Fisherwomen carrying fish loads by themselves must be exempted from market levy.
5. Stop illegal collection of money in the local fish markets.
6. Ceiling limit be fixed for the charges of head load workers from the fish vending women. The charges collected from the women should be directly by the headload workers welfare board.
7. Provide separate spaces for fish vending women and men in the market.
8. Local govt. bodies should supervise the functioning of the markets. They should directly collect the market levy from fish vendors and it should be limited to Rs.1/-
9. At least 50% of the market levy collected from fish vendors must be utilized for the modification of the market.
10. Introduce savings cum relief scheme for fish vending women too.
11. Construct waiting sheds in fishing harbour for fisherwomen and ensure their safety.
12. Ensure reservation for women in Fishermen's Co-operatives and Matsyafed welfare boards.
13. Ensure the representation of fisherwomen organisation in head load worker's welfare board.
14. The fisherwomen should have the representation in task force of people's plan in the local govt. bodies.
15. Establish residential schools for the girls from the fishing communities.
16. Provide grant for the education of girls studying in private colleges (non-governmental) from pre-degree onwards.
17. Alternate employment prospects for the girls in fishing communities should be assured for the diversification of employment.

These rights and demands declared on the Women's Day portrays the deep-rooted aspirations and the readiness with true fighting spirit of the fisherwomen for their class and the community as a whole. It also shows the correct political perspective of the group and their eagerness to be part of the working class. For the past 10 years the

fisherwomen's movement in Kerala fixed their agendas in these lines that definitely had made an imprint on their livelihood and family life.

Every year the Women's Day is observed with various programmes and activities. Seminars, workshops, public conferences, rallies, dharna, human chain etc. were some of the activities organized on every Woman's Day.

### **SEMINARS, WORKSHOPS AND CONVENTIONS**

Under the leadership of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi several seminars and workshops were organized during the years on themes like women's health, liquor culture, harbor issue and many other topics related to women and family. A public convention was organized at Ernakulam on women and livelihood, which was inaugurated by Justice D. Sreedevi. Chinna Joseph, Shanthamma Divakaran, Soudha Aziz, Girly John and Magline Peter of the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi presided over the convention.

### **POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT**

The Theeradesa Mahila Vedi is a movement of marginalized fisherwomen struggling for survival. The process of protecting the economic security of fisherwomen itself is a major political exercise for the Theeradesa Mahila Vedi. As a community dependent on the resources from the sea, political process of the struggle is intertwined with ecological concerns, gender dimension and economic security. The struggle of the Theeradesa Mahilavedi has reached a long way today. Its future depends on the nature of political support and solidarity this movement receives from all other women's groups and the struggles of other marginalized communities.

