

Distress call

The impact of climate change on women can't be ignored

PHOTO: C.V. SUBRAHMANYAM



Fishing In troubled waters

"Today, my husband caught fish worth only about Rs. 150," says Anandhi Raghu, looking alarmed. "How do we manage with this income, when groceries cost so much?" On the Kovalam beach, where they fish, the catch has been dwindling. "When the catch is huge, we auction it on our doorstep, and take some to the market. We can't afford the transport cost anymore."

Her husband Raghu thinks it's because of climate change. "We need storms in November to move the fish to the surface and closer to the shore. This year, the winds moved in the opposite direction, making wave patterns unpredictable. If seasons change, there's no breeding, no fish, no income."

Srinivasan, founder, Chennai Metro Union, has worked with fishing families for years. "Once fishermen come ashore, women take over — they buy, sell and dry the fish. Women are integral to the fishing industry," he says. "Profit-making fish such as pomfret have gone 12 to 14 nautical miles away, so men go far into the sea. They are away from home for long hours, leaving women with more responsibilities." Chandrika Sharma, working for International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, is worried. "When beaches go, drying spaces are lost," she says. "Fuel wood can't be found either. Groundwater salinity makes water collection, a woman's job, difficult." Destruction of the coastal eco-system invites change in weather patterns, which, in turn, affects coastal women's livelihoods.

"Fish migrate, there are more cyclones. Climate change adds another dimension to the women already vulnerable."

Women at the crux

According to a report on climate change, fisherwomen, salt-pan workers and coastal farmers told similar stories. Rising seas have consumed coconut groves; altered wind velocity threatens fishermen at sea; rising waters compromise the safety of women. Their homes are washed away; potable and bathing water is far inland. A fisherman from Lakshadweep had said: "Live bait for tuna is now difficult to find. Coral, in which the bait fish breed, has been affected."

"Poor women bear a 'disproportionate' climate burden," says a recent report from The United Nations Population Fund.

"Women do most of the agricultural work, have fewer income-earning opportunities. They also manage households. Weather-related natural disasters limit their chances of moving out. When drought strikes, women have to 'work harder to secure food, water and energy for their homes'. ...the close connection between gender, farming and climate change, deserves more analysis than is currently available."

Is Copenhagen listening?

GEETHA PADMANABHAN

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