

HISTORIES AND FUTURES OF GENDERED SEAFOOD MARKET SPACES IN SRI LANKA

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Small-scale fisheries are vital resource economies that sustain millions through livelihoods and food security. However, they are increasingly vulnerable due to shifting political ecologies, environmental changes, resource depletion, mechanisation and globalised value chains. These transformations, often framed within the Blue Economy, impact the sector in a gendered manner. Traditional small-scale fishers are increasingly pushed to marginal spaces within globalised value chains. Meanwhile, women face systemic exclusion from formal structures and institutions within the sector, with their contributions remaining largely unrecognised in fisheries data and policy. Furthermore, Sri Lanka went through multiple crises in the last five years, including the political economic crisis triggered by unsustainable debt and weak fiscal policies, that resulted in wide-spread fuel shortages and protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, marine disasters such as the MV X-Press Pearl disaster and development projects such as the Colombo Port City. We iteratively collected, qualitative data through individual in-depth interviews, participant observations and focus group discussions to comparatively research five seafood market spaces in Negombo, to understand the impacts of these sudden and slow-onset shocks as lived experiences. The data was collected from May 2022 to March 2023 in Negombo, Sri Lanka and involved 35 in-depth interviews and 7 focus group discussions with a total of 111 participants. Through individual histories, using social network analysis and delving into experiences of collectives and governance structures in the community, we study how groups of women continue to hold space in these markets, by creating spaces of their own, parallel to those that they are being excluded from. The data is being analysed at present, primarily following a grounded theory approach where we are coding data into theme that emerge from the interview transcripts and typed up participant observations. The findings highlight how women historically played a significant role in fish trading, but their involvement declined due to factors such as the introduction of high-value fish from outside Negombo, and the increasing masculinisation of fish trading driven by globalisation of value chains. In markets where higher-value seafood was introduced by external traders, women were often displaced from their traditional roles due to lack of capital and networks and discriminatory social norms. However, they adapted by occupying parallel spaces, such as market corridors, adjacent to the areas from which they were excluded. In peripheral markets, compared to the central market, women were more present, typically selling lower-value seafood in smaller quantities. During periods of crisis or 'rupture,' the spatial reorganisation of traders was gendered. Notably, women were observed occupying more prominent roles in fish markets during the political and economic crises. For instance, the initial stages of the crisis resulted in a lack of kerosene and diesel, which disrupted the operations of mechanised one-day and multi-day fishing boats, reducing the availability of fish for trade. Since women were primarily trading lower-value seafood items from non-mechanised traditional fishers, who had established networks with these women for decades, and dealing with smaller volumes of lower-value seafood from one-day boats instead of higher-value seafood from multi-day boats, women played a pronounced role in market spaces. The women in the peripheral markets had to rely on their networks to access the small volume of seafood that came to the central Pitipana market, which had a relatively higher supply compared to the peripheral markets. Women with

these networks were able to access this seafood and spatially shifted to sell along roadsides instead of within markets, as this offered higher access and visibility to customers. During the political economic crisis and other disruptions, the lack of institutional recognition and exclusion of women traders further exacerbated their vulnerability. Women traders were systematically excluded from compensation or support during events such as the MV X-Press Pearl ship incident or the development of the Colombo Port City. This gendered exclusion from fisheries societies reflects broader structural inequities that undermine women's agency and participation in economic activities, institutions, and decision-making spheres.