

Interview of 51 year-old Usha Tamore, Mumbai District Womens' Fish Vending Co-operative, India

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How long have you been in fish vending?

I've been a fish vendor for the past 30 years. I learnt the trade from my mother, also a vendor. My day would start at 6.30 in the morning: First to Crawford Market to buy fish from the wholesale dealers; then to Mahim Station Market to sell fish until noon; then to school; and after school I would help my mother with housework. I dropped out of school to become a full-time fish vendor when my family could no longer support my education. After marriage, we settled down in Mahim where my livelihood was.

How did you get involved in the issues of the market?

In 1975, women fish vendors of Mahim Station Market were displaced overnight by the administration for the building of Pickle Hospital. We went on to the streets in protest. The Municipal Corporation built another market but this was too small, so we had to start selling in the streets. Today we have about 100 women who sell fish in the street adjoining the hospital, while the crowded market building is falling to pieces. And that's not all. The Municipal Corporation then wanted to convert the Station Market into a wholesale fish market, which would mean the end of our fish-vending business. In protest, a group of us went to meet the local politician and, although I was a novice in leadership, I asked many questions. After that, the decision to displace us was overturned. I gained the respect of the women here and became more involved.

What other issues have you taken up?

In 2004, we took up another issue. Fish vending in markets was being badly threatened by the entry of male vendors who bought fish as a group and sold it door-to-door at cheap rates. Through this issue, we could organize women vendors across Mumbai and it got us plenty of recognition. Following a suggestion that we would benefit from a formal structure, on 5 August 2005, the Mumbai District Womens' Fish Vending Co-operative was formed. While this gave me exposure to some training and leadership, the real leadership is still in male hands and we have not achieved as much as we should.

What next?

What we need is a strong women's union to address our issues effectively in the male-dominated fisheries. Women fish vendors are mostly illiterate, vulnerable to fraud, and need State benefits like pension, insurance, savings-cum-relief schemes, transportation, cold-storage facilities and access to credit. A sound organizational base will address these issues. ❏