

EMPOWERMENT OF FISHERWOMEN OF SUNDERBANS THROUGH ORNAMENTAL FISH FARMING

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The fishing communities in Sunderbans, West Bengal still continue to remain marginalised and carry out subsistence fishing. Realising the important role women play in the development process, both governmental and non-governmental organisations started organising women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the mid-1980s. The focus of these groups has been on credit and savings, and today women's SHGs are receiving increasing recognition from governmental development agencies and the formal banking system. These developments have led to a tremendous growth in women's individual and collective self-respect and their visibility in the community. This has had a positive impact on development in general, but the role of women as aquaculture producers still remains largely unrecognised and has not been addressed. A majority of women are involved in low-income generating activities like prawn seed catching, fish drying (both self-employed and as labourers), small-scale fish vending, fish processing, pond, river and canal fisheries (with nets), net repair and finishing, shell handicrafts, fish and prawn/shrimp processing, agriculture labour, cultivation in homestead, animal husbandry activities and ornamental fishery. In India variety of indigenous ornamental fish are available. Cultivation of these fish is also in practice in India. The two most successful aquarium exporters are from West Bengal. The activity can be expanded by taking to various types of ancillary activities such as culture of indigenous species of ornamental fish, rearing and supply of accessories like filters, aerators, heating equipment, natural and artificial plants and feed etc. The Government of West Bengal is promoting ornamental fish farming. Its Department of Fisheries has established 150 women Fisher cooperatives and formed over 5000 women SHG groups mainly on ornament fish culture. Various agencies NCDC, MPEDA and NFDB have been providing technical as well as financial support to woman fish farmers. Women in this trade are involved in a combination of three major activities: farming – packaging – marketing (mainly accessories), besides carrying out their regular home making roles. The Fisheries Department with funding from NCDC and NFDB aid through West Bengal State Fisherman's Co-operative Federation Ltd. (BENFISH) has organized training and inputs on ornamental fish breeding and culture management and allied activities for the ornamental fishery women co-operatives members.