



## Winter Story

Every day they can, fish workers set their nets in the hope of a good catch. Small scale and traditional fish workers are determined they will not be squeezed out by large scale industry or polluted waterways. Credits: LAW Trust

# OUR LIFE IS SO DIFFICULT

BY GILLIAN SOUTHEY | CWS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR.

**In India the poorest people are seeing the pandemic as the latest in a long line of challenges to their lives and livelihoods. With no safety net and little help from government, communities like fish workers have to create their own pathway to survive. CWS partner LAW Trust (Legal Aid to Women) is giving them critical support as they face an uncertain future.**

For centuries the sea and its lagoons have supported small scale and traditional fish workers in India's Tamil Nadu state. Where once the coast was busy with people fishing or earning their livelihood on the shore, large sections are now inaccessible. Enormous power plants, high cost tourist resorts and extensive shrimp farms or business enterprises like ship breaking operate in their place. Many people have given up and moved inland. Chandramathi is one woman who is standing firm.

She can be found hard at work on the sandy beach not far from her home. Other women are close by and the chatter is lively. The women work quickly, deftly spreading fish out on concrete pads in the warm sun. In a few hours they will be back turning them over to hasten the drying process. When the fish are dry, the women will sell them to an agent under lockdown conditions, giving them barely enough money to buy some rice and perhaps other food for their families.

"We are always working in the hot sun. People would feel pity for us preparing salted and dried fish. We think we are born as fish workers. Our life is so difficult," says Chandramathi.



Varalamathi (left) sorts the leftover fish for drying. During lockdown, markets are not open so there is nowhere to sell their pickles and soup. Chandramathi (right) had to overcome her fears to go nightfishing to support her children and meet the costs of debt repayment. Her determination to do whatever it takes to care for her family is inspirational to other members of the Tamil Nadu Fish Workers *Sangam*.

Chandramathi is a professional fish worker and a proud member of the Tamil Nadu Fish Workers *Sangam* or Association. Under lockdown, Chandramathi and her three children spend most of the time in their small home. School is closed and the children are unable to attend online classes because they have no phone. The poor quality dry rations provided by the state government are not enough for the month so they are often hungry. They have become used to going without.

She first encountered LAW Trust in 2015 when the family received emergency help after her husband's boat and net were damaged in Cyclone Ranov. Naval



Fishworkers clean, gut and dry the fish so it can be transported inland for sale. Some catch fish themselves while others buy the cheap, leftovers from the morning markets.

was able to get work as a labourer but it was not enough to support them and Chandramathi became depressed. Eventually the family took out a loan so he could travel to Dubai where he found work.

Initially he sent money home but with the outbreak of Covid-19 it stopped. Soon the moneylender was at the door. With no other option, Chandramathi went fishing. She would leave the house at 5 pm to go fishing by herself in the backwater. The night was cold and she had no protection. At 5 am she would return to get her children ready for school and do household chores. Later she sorted the fish to sell, cooking any leftover to accompany the evening meal of rice. Whenever there are cyclones or high seas, the area where they live floods, adding to her woes.

Six years ago, Chandramathi went to her first meeting with LAW Trust. There was a lot of discussion on the issues and concerns of fishing communities. Participants realised that they needed to work together to stop the destruction of their livelihoods and further damage to the coast. In workshops on women's and children's rights, she realised she could do something about her worries – the solitude and lack of regular income that gave her headaches, insomnia and fatigue. With support from LAW Trust, she formed a micro-enterprise group with other single mothers in her area. The women learnt business skills and received a start-up loan.

At first their business flourished. They flavoured the fish they had dried with 19 different flavours, and made prawn and fish pickles, crab soup and other ready to eat snacks. But when fishing stopped for the breeding season, they were stuck. The women could not store

**“My learning experiences have transformed me from having a gloomy outlook to being a promising entrepreneur,” says Chandramathi.**

fish. LAW Trust agreed to lend them money to build a storage facility – delayed because of the lockdowns.

Others might have given up but this proud professional fish worker has become more determined. Once lockdown is over, the Kadla Pookal (Sea Flower) Group plans to relaunch its food business.

“My learning experiences have transformed me from having a gloomy outlook to being a promising entrepreneur,” she says confidently.

Chandramathi cannot imagine life away from the sea. On the coast, she has dignity and respect. She wants her children to stay close to the water that will feed them for generations to come. With your help, fish workers like her will be able to start new businesses and stand up for their fundamental human rights.

**Please support vulnerable women like Chandramathi by donating to our Winter Appeal today.**

- \$46** will fund an interest free loan so a fish worker can pay her debts and get ahead
- \$130** will provide an emergency ration pack for an Indian family
- \$1,000** will fund a loan to a women's micro-enterprise sangam so members can purchase equipment and meet interest payments on existing loans held by members.

**Donate now at [www.cws.org.nz](http://www.cws.org.nz).**

Phone 0800 74 73 72 or post to CWS, PO Box 22652, Christchurch 8140.



**Christian  
World Service**