

Dried fish business empowers women in Sri Lanka

– Support for women struggling against poverty in a Sri Lankan fishing village



Tools including wooden boxes provided by Japan for making dried fish. (Photo: Mitsuko Nishimori / PARCIC)

Jaffna District, a region in the northernmost part of Sri Lanka surrounded on three sides by the sea, has a robust fisheries industry. It is also a region that has seen a continued increase in the number of households with a widow. Many of the local women lost their husbands to Sri Lanka's prolonged civil war and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. According to data from 2010, there were approximately 40,000 widows in the northern part of the country alone. It goes against local traditions for a woman to fish in place of her husband. This means that job opportunities for these women are very limited, and as a consequence, many widows and their families are living in poverty. They often only manage to eke out meager existences by taking up jobs related to fishing, such as sorting caught fish and making dried fish out of small fry not fit for sale.

Support for full scale fish drying

In 2003, during a ceasefire from Sri Lanka's civil war, a survey of the area was started by the Pacific Asia Resource Center – Interpeople's Cooperation (PARCIC), a specified non-profit organization that focuses on international aid and the promotion of fair trade. They established an office in Jaffna in 2004 and began offering assistance to the widows living in the area. Dried fish has traditionally been part of the local diet in Sri Lanka. However due to problems in the manufacturing process, deficiencies such as residual sand or excess salt in the products are common. PARCIC decided to help widows learn how to make high quality dried fish for a full-scale business, with the goal of providing them with a reliable source of income. Just when the organization was about to start a project to that end, the Indian Ocean Tsunami hit. PARCIC continued its activities in Sri Lanka, and shifted its support towards assistance for the victims of the tsunami from 2005 onward. Sometime after that, the civil war again flared up and PARCIC was left with no choice but to withdraw from Sri Lanka. In 2010, after the conclusion of the civil



Ms. Nishimori (left) helping widowed women make dried fish. (Photo: Mitsuko Nishimori / PARCIC)

war, PARCIC was finally able to return and fully begin its dried fish project. JICA supported the organization's work, enabling them to start "the Dried Fish Project for Women in Jaffna Fishing Community" as a JICA Partnership Program¹. That project was to be conducted for three years from October 2010 to September 2013. Ms. Mitsuko Nishimori of PARCIC was sent to the site to work on the project and stayed there from December 2010 until the project was concluded.

"In this project, we supported widows through fish drying with the goal of improving their lives by creating a business that could provide them with a certain amount of regular income. Partly due to the teachings of Hinduism, the women of Jaffna District are raised to believe that women should be protected by men, so society does not expect girls to become economically independent, and many of them reach adulthood without ever making any money themselves. These women, raised in such a society, found themselves in a difficult position in which they needed to make money on their own to feed themselves and their children after losing their husbands or brothers during the civil war or tsunami."

PARCIC invited a retired professional fisherman from Japan to train the women how to use sanitary methods to dry fish. PARCIC staff also organized the training to ensure product quality and develop new sales channels, in addition to lessons on basic bookkeeping. This project helped the women learn how to make high quality dried fish and handle products in a sanitary way. For example, people in the area used to place fish directly on the ground to dry leading to hygiene problems, so the project staff provided the women with wooden boxes made especially for fish drying. However, all of this is not to say that the project did not run into a number of difficulties.

The change in staff mindset

"The first issue we struggled with was the caste system. The caste system still remains deeply rooted, particularly in Jaffna District in Sri Lanka. People who are not from the fishermen's caste² tend to refuse to do fishing or fishery work. Furthermore, many Hindus dislike the smell of fish and jobs that involve killing living things. A major challenge for the project was that the women hesitated to touch fish or help with the carrying and selling of dried goods themselves, even though the Sri Lankan PARCIC staff were willing to give them advice and instructions, making it difficult to develop sales channels. That is why, I, as a foreigner with no reservations about touching fish, stepped in. I began to accompany the women and staff when visiting prospective customers. My presence as a Japanese person also seemed to help assure buyers about our product quality, which helped us find new sales channels. As the business took off, the mindset of the staff about dried fish began to change. The Sri Lankan staff members began to act as intermediaries between the village women and the customers, and started to work actively to increase their business volume."