

Leading from the Front

Swapna Majumdar (India)

Forty five-year old Samundeswari is an accidental fisherwoman. Born into a non-fishing community in the southern coastal state of Tamil Nadu, India, Samundeswari learnt about the fish business only after her marriage to a fisherman at the age of 17. She would sell fish caught by her husband. But he spent so much of the family earnings on alcohol that Samundeswari also worked in a nearby nursery school as a teacher after selling fish in the morning. Even though she managed household duties and rearing three children alongside, she yearned to make something out of her life.

Little did she know that an impending disaster would give her the opportunity to change not just her own life but of many others.

When the tsunami struck India in 2004, Tamil Nadu was badly affected. Samundeswari's house along with hundreds of others living near the coast in Chennai, was destroyed by the huge waves. When Arunodhaya, a local organization, began relief and rehabilitation work in the area, they needed community members to assist them. Finding Samundeswari the only educated woman in the village, they enlisted her as their volunteer in 2005.

It was the opportunity Samundeswari had been waiting for. She became deeply involved in helping her village community get their entitlements and slowly rebuilding their lives. "She helped the village people get their voter cards, ration cards and other documents necessary to access their rights and was instrumental in bringing change in her village," said Virgil D'Sami, executive director of Arunodhaya.

A quick learner, Samundeswari's hard work and commitment moved her up the Arunodhaya ranks to the position of a women's rights coordinator with the responsibility of mentoring almost 107 women self help groups. "I didn't ever think a disaster would give my life such a positive new direction and I could help others. It gave me the chance to learn more about women's rights and work with other groups to voice the concerns of women fish workers," said Samundeswari.

Samundeswari came in close touch with many female fish workers and was instrumental in forming the Coastal Women's Federation, a collective of women from both fishing and non-fishing communities in 2008. Since then, the group has also been addressing the prevalent problems of domestic violence and alcoholism and has managed to close down some liquor shops in the villages and resolve some domestic disputes.

In 2008, when a government notification diluting customary rights of communities living along the coast was announced, Samundeswari and other members of the Coastal Women's Federation were vociferous partners of the protest campaign. "We all sat in protest blindfolded. This created a stir and helped to highlight our problems," she said.

In 2014, she motivated women fish workers to form a trade union. This is the first such union in the state. Its 107 members showed the power of collective by ensuring that a women's bathroom was constructed in the fish market. This was a huge achievement. They also campaigned successfully for the installation of a drainage system to maintain hygiene.

But even as she was taking the community movement forward, there was trouble brewing at home. Her husband didn't want Samundeswari to spend so much time outside the house. He objected to all the time she put into the training sessions on land and women's rights. "There was a lot of tension in the house. It took me a long time to make him understand my work. I took him with me to one such training session so that he could see my work. This helped to reduce his fears. Now he even helps to pack my bags when I have to travel for work," said Samundeswari with a smile.

