

Every Wave Carries Her Labour, Every Shore Her Claim

Commemorating the first International Fisher Women's Day – November 5

When the women of the sea rise, the tide of justice changes course. On 5 November, the global fisher movements celebrate the first International Fisher Women's Day (IFWD) — a day born out of the lived struggles of coastal, inland, and riverine fisher women who have sustained life, food, and freedom across waters for centuries.

This date, declared at the India Fisher Women Assembly in 2024 and endorsed by the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) at its General Assembly – 8, held in Brazil (2024), affirms what fisher women have always known — that their labour, wisdom, and courage are central to the survival of fisheries, yet persistently erased from its history. It is a day not of token recognition, but of reclamation.

From March 8 to November 5 — Anchoring Feminist Struggles in the Ocean

When Rosa Luxemburg wrote, “Those who do not move, do not notice their chains,” she was speaking of a universal truth that binds women's struggles across time. From the factory floors of Europe in the early 20th century to the fish landing centres and mangrove shores of the Global South today, women have moved — and in that movement, they have made history. Today, fisher women across continents are rising up to break their chains of social, cultural and economic oppression.

International Women's Day (March 8) was conceived by socialist feminists like Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg as a rallying cry for working women — to demand political rights, labour dignity, and an end to exploitation. The fisher women's movement draws from that same lineage. It reminds the world that emancipation cannot be land-locked. The politics of the ocean, too, must carry the red thread of gender justice, collective ownership, and equality.

As Zetkin had insisted, “The working women's question is not an isolated question, but part of the great social question.” Today, the fisher women of Asia, Africa, Latin America and beyond echo that insight. Their struggle is not separate from the global fight against capitalism and patriarchy — it is the living sea-front of that fight.

Why November 5 Matters

Fisher women's work has always been invisible to power. They mend nets, process and market fish, manage households, protect coasts from erosion, and sustain the cultural and spiritual fabric of their communities. Yet, in policy, law, and public memory, they remain unrecognised — seen as ‘helpers’, not ‘fishers’. Unfortunately, many of the unions of fishers continue their

identity as fishermen's organisations, till date.

The Kerala Assembly of 2024, which brought together women from India's coasts, rivers, and lakes, challenged that erasure head-on. They declared that women are not secondary actors but rightful claimants of the seas, custodians of knowledge, and defenders of territory. Out of that collective assertion emerged a global call — that November 5 be observed every year as International Fisher Women's Day.

This declaration was later affirmed at the WFFP General Assembly in Brazil, linking fisher women's leadership to the broader international movement for food sovereignty and climate justice. The WFFP, which represents more than 70 national movements across 50 countries, now recognises fisher women's organising as essential to the future of small-scale fisheries and ocean and inland democracy.

The Demands of the Women of Waters

The celebration of this day is inseparable from its political content. Fisher women across regions are calling for:

1. Full recognition of women as fishers in law, policy, and statistics — not as dependents or secondary workers.
2. Equal rights to resources and territories, including coastal lands, inland waters, and near-shore zones, free from corporate and industrial encroachment.
3. Decent work and social protection, including maternity rights, accident insurance, and inclusion in all post-disaster compensation and climate adaptation programmes.
4. Just and fair markets, first sale rights, access to credit, storage, and direct trade — cutting through exploitative intermediaries.
5. Representation and leadership, with women's quotas in fisheries boards, cooperatives, and movements.
6. Protection of ecosystems and community control, resisting destructive aquaculture, deep-sea mining, and militarisation of coasts.
7. An end to caste and gender-based violence, both within communities and by state institutions.

These are not abstract appeals — they are survival demands, drawn from centuries of unpaid, unrecognised, and undervalued work that sustains the world's food systems.

Ocean Feminism: From Margins to the Centre

The concept of 'Aqua Ecology', emerging from movements like WFFP and debated at the recently held Nyeleni Global Forum, reframes fisheries not as extractive industries but as living systems of relationship with aqua territories, care, and justice. In this vision, fisher women are

not beneficiaries of development — they are architects of a future that honours the ocean as a commons, not a commodity.

Across the Global South, fisher women's collectives are showing that community-led conservation and women's leadership are the most effective tools for sustaining fish stocks, resisting the Blue Economy's corporate enclosures, and confronting climate injustice. Their stories — from the women of Chilika, Karaikal and Kutch in India to those of Thailand, Senegal, Indonesia, South Africa and Brazil — are the songs of a new, planetary feminism.

From Recognition to Transformation

This International Fisher Women's Day, we remember that the ocean too has a memory — of all who have laboured along its edges and defended its depths. Fisher women's movements are writing a new chapter in that history: one where solidarity replaces charity, and recognition gives way to transformation.

As Rosa Luxemburg warned, "Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently." Fisher women across the world are thinking — and fighting — differently: against neoliberal enclosures, against caste and gender hierarchies, and for the right to live with dignity on their own terms.

Their freedom is the ocean's freedom. Their struggle is humanity's. When the tide rises, may the world rise with them.

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Vijayan M.J. is Director, Participatory Action Research Coalition India and an advisor of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP).