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# Productivity, Competition, and Empowerment? The Experience of Pondicherry Fisherwomen in the Context of Neoliberal Development

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## **Productivity, Competition, and Empowerment?**

The Experience of Pondicherry Fisherwomen in the Context of Neoliberal  
Development

Amelia Colliver

SIT Study Abroad: Sustainable Development and Social Change

Fall 2018

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## 1. Abstract

*The subject of this study is female fisherwomen from the fishing village of Veerampattinam in Tamil Nadu who have experienced impacts of neoliberal economics in India. Neoliberalism is here defined as a political economic movement that determines the viability of both an individual and a government based on its economic productivity. Populations reliant on traditional livelihoods are not as efficient as mechanized sectors of their industry, and therefore they are often separated from easy access to their livelihoods by neoliberal policies. This is especially true for women, who are frequently left behind in neoliberalism because their work is considered less valuable on the basis of their gender. What is the experience of women in the context of neoliberal development, and how do women in Pondicherry fishing villages define political freedom? This object of this study is to explore the experience of fisherwomen, and how that experience has been impacted by neoliberalism. Once identifying their experience, this study seeks to begin to understand the ways in which women's definition of political freedom contradicts the neoliberal definition. The study finds that neoliberalism has caused shifts in government behavior, individual thought and action, and connection of women to traditional livelihood. However, women believe in collective responsibility, community unity, and empowerment beyond economic empowerment, which pose contradictions to neoliberal theory.*

## 2. Introduction

Pondicherry, India has experienced numerous changes in the last few decades, including the construction of a harbor south of Pondicherry city, the mechanization of the fishing industry, and a severely decreased population of fish which has harmed fishing livelihoods. These changes have impacted each person connected to the fishing communities, but they have especially impacted women who rely on traditional methods of fishing for their livelihood. Many of these shifts can be attributed to changes in government action, changes in the thoughts and actions of individuals within the fishing community. The changing connection of women to their traditional livelihood is the product of greater disconnect between the community and traditionalism. Shifts in government action, individual thought and action, and women's connection to traditional livelihood all bear resemblances to neoliberal theory; however, some women in the community reveal ideas which contrast neoliberalism, such as a desire for community unity and responsibility for public welfare and a definition of empowerment as something greater than proximity to material wealth. This study seeks to understand the experience of women in Pondicherry fishing communities in the context of neoliberal development and attempts to begin to uncover the women's definition of political freedom in contrast to the neoliberal definition.

## 2.1 Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political theory that is widely discussed in development literature, and the critique of neoliberalism as a system that disproportionately impacts small-scale industry, traditional practices, and women is well documented. However, because neoliberalism is a term frequently used by critics but rarely the authors who write neoliberal works, its definition is quite slippery. As a term it has been conflated with a range of ideological movements such as laissez-faire economics, market fundamentalism, libertarianism, and others. Some claim that because the label is so hard to define concretely the term itself is illegitimate. According to Notre Dame economics professor Philip Mirowski, words that stand in for political doctrines are notoriously unreliable, but this shouldn't lead to the belief that "the only legitimate labels are those which are freely embraced by the very people who espouse the doctrines in question." While political doctrines can rarely be reduced to a simplified term, "powerful ideas that spark long-lived movements do eventually roll in well-worn grooves," and labels can be used to indicate a set of resemblances.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand how neoliberal theory impacts a specific context, the defining features of the doctrine must first be distinguished. Once neoliberalism's characteristics are identified, its critiques are better appreciated.

Some neoliberal thinkers, like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, are easy to point out regardless of their attempts to hide behind the masks of other ideologies. For example, in *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman does not define his theory as neoliberal, but instead establishes himself as a 'classical liberal.' *Capitalism and Freedom* defines a force known as 'the market' as a necessary component to providing true freedom: free the markets and you will free the people. In free markets, "the consumer is protected from coercion by the seller because of the presence of other sellers with whom he can deal. The seller is protected from coercion by the consumer because of other consumers to whom he

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<sup>1</sup> Mirowski, Phillip. "Neoliberalism: The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Own Name." *American Affairs*2, no. 1 (2018). Accessed October 10, 2018. <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/neoliberalism-movement-dare-not-speak-name/>.

can sell.”<sup>2</sup> Because consumers and sellers are unable to coerce one another, the market has provided them freedom that regulations by the state would have encumbered. In his theoretical works, Friedman’s, like many neoliberals, commitments follow closely with the commitments of a libertarian. However, many neoliberal thinkers will hide behind the guise of another ideology such as libertarianism or classical liberalism in order to disguise a deeper intention. This intention is exposed in Friedman’s policy choices, such as recommending to the Reagan administration that the state mold centrally planned economies into free market economies in Latin America. There is also evidence in his personal correspondence, such as 1973 letter to Pat Buchanan in which he says “we are talking at cross-purposed because of what I regard as the important necessity of keeping clearly separate the long-run ideal goal and the tactical steps that may be appropriate in moving towards it.”<sup>3</sup> The tactical steps include creating a conflation between the notion of neoliberalism and libertarianism in order to confuse the public into buying into an ideology fronting as something it wasn’t.

Mirowski attempts to disentangle neoliberalism from its libertarian and market fundamentalist cousins. While market fundamentalism deals with the mathematical models at the root of economic theory, Neoliberalism is a “philosophy of market society, and not some narrow set of doctrines restricted to economics.”<sup>4</sup> More than fostering free markets, neoliberalism seeks to redefine society in terms of the market. Classical liberalism imagined a state that “set boundaries for the growth of the markets, like a shepherd tending [their] flock. Markets were born, not made.”<sup>5</sup> Neoliberals reverse this idea: markets are made, not born. Neoliberalism mistrusts the state; however, it is not opposed to state interventions as libertarianism would be. For example, Friedman discusses the role of the state as preventing the coercion of individuals, enforcing contracts voluntarily entered into, providing a definition of property rights that is enforced, and providing a monetary framework that can be followed; in his own words, the role of the

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009: 14.

<sup>3</sup> Mirowski, Phillip. "Neoliberalism: The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Own Name." *American Affairs*2, no. 1 (2018). Accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

government is to do that which the market can't do for itself.<sup>6</sup> This definition of the role of state does not make for a nonexistent state, nor does it make for a small one. Rather, the state is defined as an entity that remakes society in the eyes of the market. According to Mirowski, this is “the distinguishing characteristic of neoliberal doctrines and practice... they embrace this prospect of repurposing the strong state to impose their vision of a society properly open to the dominance of the market as they conceive it.”<sup>7</sup> The state's role becomes economic growth above all else, meanwhile the individual becomes a form of capital whose worth is tied to productivity.

American Political Theorist Wendy Brown unpacks the implications of neoliberal theory for democracy and the individuals who live in a neoliberal world. In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman establishes that when economics are separated from politics, there is equality in society because the only reason to discriminate in a free market is in areas related to productivity.<sup>8</sup> Hidden within this statement, however, is the implication that humans *must* be productive in order to not face discrimination. Friedman goes farther than describing the role of free markets in promoting freedom. He redefines the role of the individual in society so that, according to Brown, there are “no motivations, drive, or aspirations, apart from economic ones.”<sup>9</sup> Everything that any individual does becomes a method of growth in economic terms, even in cases where no monetary investment is involved. Each individual becomes an entrepreneur of the self; the goal of this entrepreneurship is to advance competitive value or ranking, be it, for example, in strict monetary terms, number of followers on social media, or educational standing. Not only is the individual redefined, but the “legitimacy and tasks of the state become bound exclusively to economic growth, global competitiveness, and maintenance of a strong credit rating, [while] liberal democratic justice concerns recede.”<sup>10</sup> Once the role of the state and the individual is defined as cultivating economic

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<sup>6</sup> Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009: 27.

<sup>7</sup> Mirowski, Phillip. "Neoliberalism: The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Own Name." *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018). Accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: 21

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 40.



growth, human rights, environmental justice, and liberal democracy are subordinated to the will of the market. Economic growth is the “end and legitimation of government,” and government must subsume all undertakings to economic health.<sup>11</sup> Neoliberalism sets out actively to dismantle those aspects of society which might resist productivity and reshape them in the market’s image, rather than “trying to preserve society against the unintended consequences of the operations of markets, as democratic liberalism sought to do.”<sup>12</sup> Freedom becomes indistinguishable from the market and government becomes indistinguishable from firms. Human rights and sustainability are subordinated to the market and are only prioritized by the state as long as it is economically preferable to do so. Justice and sustainability are transformed from an obligation of the state into a business whose end goal is not necessarily a more just or sustainable society, but a more economically competitive one.

## 2.2 Feminism and Development

Within feminist understandings of development, there is a collection of thought known as Women in Development which, similar to neoliberalism, relies on boosting the competitiveness of women in order to include them in development. In the Women in Development (WID) view, development is a linear process of economic growth in which society goes from the traditional/undeveloped to the modern/developed, and “differences between the modern and the traditional resulted from a lack of contact. Applying this idea to women, Third World women were left out of the development process.”<sup>13</sup> The solution was to include Third World women within the growth-based development model through the extension of credit services and increased employment. The WID discourse “promoted free markets, voluntary choice, and individualism, which disempowered Third World women... [and] ideological aspects of gender, unequal responsibilities between men and women, and the unequal value placed on

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 26.

<sup>12</sup> Mirowski, Phillip. "Neoliberalism: The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Own Name." *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018). Accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Peet, Richard, and Elaine R. Hartwick. *Theories of Development*. New York: Guilford Press, 2015: 180.

men's and women's activities were all ignored."<sup>14</sup> Those embracing the women in development approach rely on a market based response to gender inequality, ignoring the intersectional factors that contribute to the issue at hand. The WID approach seeks to restructure women's roles to be more market-like under the assumption that doing so will eventually lead women's liberation. Despite this, even as an attempt is made at leveling the economic playing field the equality of women in a developed world "remains an elusive concept of economic freedom as described by advocates of globalization and neoliberalism who assert that women are expected to enter in many new job opportunities in the new economic era, whereas the reality depicts that emerging new opportunities laid out to them generate further exploitations and vulnerability."<sup>15</sup> More often than not, WID solutions to gender inequality in developing countries rely on economic opportunities that subjugate women to the will of the market rather than liberating them from exploitation.

When development is defined as economic growth, femininity is often equated with backwardness and traditional thinking, which leads to the devaluation of women's roles on a state and individual level. A dichotomy is created between the modern, rational, masculine state and the traditional, developing, feminine state, making "the achievement of modernity a power struggle with the feminine for modernity."<sup>16</sup> The traditional role of women is delegitimized by the state which is led by industrialism and economic efficiency. Tradition becomes the antithesis of that efficiency, and an understanding that the consumption and growth lived in the Global North is the goal to be strived for is imbued into individual value structures in the Global South. According to German sociologist Maria Mies, "this process of acceptance of the values, lifestyles and standard of living of 'those on top' is invariably accompanied by a devaluation of one's own culture, work, technology, lifestyle, and often philosophy of life and social institutions."<sup>17</sup> As a process of economic growth, the culture, livelihood, and philosophy of those who are 'developing' is made subordinate to the rational modernity of the 'developed.' For

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 182.

<sup>15</sup> Sarkar, Sumita, and Manjari Srivastava. *Globalization and Gender*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2011: 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 176.

<sup>17</sup> Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Jaipur, RJ: Rawat Publications, 1993: 244.

example, in India the relationship of “cash and commodity has replaced the earlier defined values based on socio-economic relations. This in turns endangers social cohesion and kinship bonds of rural India.”<sup>18</sup> The social bonds that are essential to rural Indian society are endangered by the assumed subservience of both the feminine and the traditional to that which promotes growth. The devaluation of the feminine in development redefines all aspects life in terms of cash, commodity, and economic growth in order to mimic the masculine, modern, and rational state.

Critiques of the WID point of view, such as The Women, Environment, and Development (WED) school of thought, point to the parallels between the domination of the global south by the north, male domination of female, and the domination of ecological health by industrialization. According to popular advocate of the WED approach Vandana Shiva, the “capitalist patriarchy notion of freedom is the unrestrained right of men with economic power to own, control, and destroy life as articulated as ‘free-trade’”<sup>19</sup> The commodification of everything and the devaluation of women and the traditional has led to the domination of women and the environment by men and the wealthy. Governments such as India are compelled to “protect the interests of global counterparts, otherwise capital would move to other countries where wages are lower, and workers have fewer rights.”<sup>20</sup> Without protecting the interests of global corporations, capital would flee and the nation’s growth rate in terms of GDP would be negatively impacted. In a world where the role of government is to promote economic growth, there is no larger threat to the validity of a government. Rather than protect the livelihoods of the people, particularly the women, governments such as India’s are incentivized to prioritize growth over everything.

Because the role of government is redefined in terms of economic growth and the role of the individual is redefined as liquid human capital, the promised rights of liberal democracy are diminished. As stated by Maria Mies:

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<sup>18</sup> Sarkar, Sumita, and Manjari Srivastava. *Globalization and Gender*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2011: 7.

<sup>19</sup> Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Jaipur, RJ: Rawat Publications, 1993: 244.

<sup>20</sup> Sarkar, Sumita, and Manjari Srivastava. *Globalization and Gender*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2011: 7.

“The promises of freedom, equality, self-determination of the individual, the great values of the French Revolution, proclaimed as universal rights and hence also meant for women, are betrayed for many women because all of these rights depend on the possession of property, and on money. Freedom is the freedom of those who possess money. Equality is the equality of money. Self-determination is the freedom of choice in the supermarket. Thus freedom, equality, self-determination is always dependent on those who control the money or property.”<sup>21</sup>

Those promoting economic development may seek liberation for the masses, but that liberation is dependent on a system that is run by economic capital and reduces the individual to proximity to material wealth. Frequently, women have access to money and property only through their husbands or male members of family, further diminishing their freedom. Women, especially women in the Global South, are excluded when development is equated to capital accumulation and the legitimacy of both individuals and government is equated to economic production.

### **2.3 Development and Fishing Communities**

An understanding that the growth of industries will legitimize the government has led to environmental and social degradation in fishing communities. Oceans have long been viewed as inexhaustible. This has led to the philosophy that humanity is free to exploit the ocean’s unlimited resources; in fact, the concept of over fishing was non-existent prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> While the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw some movement toward conservationism, in recent decades the fishing industry has shifted from local activities to global market influenced industries that employ millions and generate export for many nations. In India, the fisheries sector has been witnessing steady growth during this shift: “the annual fish production rose to over 6.9 million tons during 2006-7 from around 0.75 million tons in 1950-1.”<sup>23</sup> The growth of fisheries is the product of government investment in efficiency to lead to GDP

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<sup>21</sup> Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Jaipur, RJ: Rawat Publications, 1993: 66.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, H. D., The Industrialization of the World Ocean. *Ocean and Coastal Management* 43. 2000: p11-28.

<sup>23</sup> George, Bindu. *Technological Change and Modernization in the Fishing Sector: The Question of Sustainability*. PhD diss., Cochin University of Science and Technology, 2011. Kochi, Kerala, 2011: 14.

growth, but the 50 million fishers from local communities who are reliant on fishing for subsistence are marginalized in the process. Because the oceans are not an unlimited resource, coastal, marine, and freshwater resources are under stress from exploitation. As the demand for fisheries products increases, fisheries are increasingly impacted by intensifying economization.<sup>24</sup> As fishing becomes a lucrative export enterprise, the communities reliant on fishing for subsistence are made secondary to boosting industrial growth.

As governments are increasingly interested in promoting fishery exports, more efficient fishing technologies are emphasized. For example, the Indian government has taken efforts to supply trawlers to fishermen through co-operatives, however, this policy backfired. Rather than providing the trawlers to the working fishermen, the boats “ended up going into the hands of middlemen and outsiders who were absentee owners with no long-term stake in fishing other than profits.”<sup>25</sup> The attempts to subsidize trawlers were intended to support poor fishermen, they instead supported owners with little interest in the preservation of the coastal ecosystems. Because of the efficiency of trawlers in collecting ocean life and their increasing numbers due to government support, fish resources are highly stressed. Today, the number of fisherfolk “involved in active fishing is more than the absorbing capacity of the fisheries sector and has led to lower per capita production.”<sup>26</sup> Lower per capita production leads to lower per capita income, which increases the vulnerability and marginalization of fisherfolk who continue to rely on traditional methods of fishing for their livelihood.

Marginalized fisherfolk face not only decreased fish stocks because of the increase in mechanized boats, but the mechanized sector of the fishing industry has also begun to dominate in terms of income. In 2012, PondyCAN, the National Coastal Protection Campaign, and TISS produced a report on the coast of India. In this report, it was found that there are 3288 marine fishing villages in India’s nine maritime states and union territories, hosting four million marine fisherfolk; 61% of these fisherfolk are below the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 20.

<sup>25</sup> George, Bindu. *Technological Change and Modernization in the Fishing Sector: The Question of Sustainability*. PhD diss., Cochin University of Science and Technology, 2011. Kochi, Kerala, 2011: 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 80

poverty line, and 38% are engaged in active fishing.<sup>27</sup> Most fishing continues to be artisanal and small scale, with 167,957 of the 194,490 ocean crafts fully owned by artisanal fishers; however, about 70% of the cash earned by the fishing industry is brought in by mechanized boats despite mechanized boats only providing employment to around 34% of fishers.<sup>28</sup> As mechanization has changed the fishing industry in the last few decades, “export-oriented fishery policies have resulted in over-fishing and eroded marine ecologies to the detriment of small-scale and artisanal fisher communities.”<sup>29</sup> Even as most fishing continues to be small scale, these artisanal communities are under increasing pressure due to environmental degradation and decreased access to income.

In addition to the economic and environmental stress on artisanal fishers, mechanization has led to stress on traditional community institutions such as local governance and traditional livelihoods. According to the PondyCAN report, “the community institutions mostly organized along caste, kinship or religious lines, play an important role in resolving conflicts, besides regulating and allocating resource use, ensuring equitable access to resources and providing some form of social insurance. Most communities have their own management systems over time to regulate human interaction with the resource.”<sup>30</sup> When mechanized fishing boats from outside the community begin to use the resources that the community is reliant on, the community institutions have less credibility as they can no longer fully control who has access to resources and when. Similarly, according to the report, “many traditional activities such as boat building and net making which were village based have been replaced by factory production.”<sup>31</sup> When the traditional activities leave the community, the community has lost a portion of its livelihood and has lost touch with the traditional activities that defined their culture for centuries.

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<sup>27</sup> Ahana Lakshmi, Aurofilio Schiavina, Probir Banjeree, Ajit Reddy, Sunaina Mandeem, Sudarshan Rodriguez, and Deepak Apte, “The Challenged Coast of India,” A report prepared by PondyCAN in collaboration with BNHS and TISS. October 2012: 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 26.

<sup>29</sup> Novak-Colwell, Julia M., Mark Axelrod, Shyam S. Salim, and S. Velvizhi. "A Gendered Analysis of Fisherfolk's Livelihood Adaptation and Coping Responses in the Face of a Seasonal Fishing Ban in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, India." *World Development* 98. 2017: 325-37.

<sup>30</sup> Ahana Lakshmi, Aurofilio Schiavina, Probir Banjeree, Ajit Reddy, Sunaina Mandeem, Sudarshan Rodriguez, and Deepak Apte, “The Challenged Coast of India,” A report prepared by PondyCAN in collaboration with BNHS and TISS. October 2012: 26.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 27.

Women who are reliant on the fishing industry are marginalized by the mechanization and modernization process because they are estranged from access to their livelihood. In a study on the labor dynamics of a fishing village in Kerala, India, Aswathy and Kalpana found that the majority female workforce was severely threatened by neoliberal development as mechanized boats were promoted by the government for economic gain. The 67% female workforce was impacted when mechanization led to a decrease in scale of fishing, and the women that had an active involvement in traditional livelihoods found themselves withdrawing from their livelihood activity.<sup>32</sup> When it became economically viable for them to do so, women fishing vendors re-entered the market, but only to a limited amount. The discourse of the state which valorized “women’s entrepreneurship did not guarantee women’s economic empowerment or commercial success... states pursuing neoliberal economic policies encourage women in poverty to embrace risks and manage micro-business, even as globalized market networks and corporate players are allowed a free hand.”<sup>33</sup> In neoliberal thought and the feminist discourses sympathetic to neoliberalism, women are told that their empowerment is the product of economic success. However, economic success is not easily achieved when their competition is a large trans-national corporation that acts without limits. Because they are impacted by changes in the scale of the fishing industry, women who are reliant on the fishing are made vulnerable by mechanized fishing boats and the subsequent environmental degradation.

#### **2.4 The Context of Fishing in Pondicherry, India**

Fishing communities in the Union Territory of Pondicherry have faced many of the impacts of neoliberal policies that other communities across India and the globe have experienced. In the specific context of Pondicherry, the government of India has sought to impose a restructuring of coastal industries.

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<sup>32</sup> Aswathy, P., and K. Kalpana. "The 'Stigma' of Paid Work: Capital, State, Patriarchy, and Women Fish Workers in South India." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19, no. 5 (May 2018): 113-28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

This has led to the erosion of precious beaches which are used for artisanal fishing activities, adverse environmental impacts, and the marginalization of traditional fishing.

One of the largest impacts on the environment and local communities in Pondicherry is coastal erosion, which has eaten away a majority of the coastline in the territory. This erosion is a man-made process driven in large part by the government's agenda to increase GDP of the union territory, which pressured them to construct a commercial port south of Pondicherry town.<sup>34</sup> The harbor, completed in 1989, is located 1.5km from the main town of Pondicherry, and it has two breakwaters which have interrupted the natural replenishing of sand, known as littoral drift. The breakwaters act as dams that prevent littoral drift, causing accumulation on one side and depletion on the other.<sup>35</sup> Within Pondicherry, as well as north of the city and into the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, beaches have been severely eroded as a product of the harbor's construction.

Fishing communities in Pondicherry rely heavily on the beaches for a variety of livelihood activities such as drying nets and storing boats. However, as a result of the harbor's construction and the subsequent erosion, shore-based fishing activities have been severely affected in areas north of the harbor.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, women rely on the beaches for space to dry fish brought in by the fishermen. As the harbor has led to erosion, there is no longer adequate space for drying, and many of the surplus fish are disposed of while a vital role of women in the industry has been eradicated.<sup>37</sup> Not only have women been estranged from a large part of their contribution to the fishing industry as a byproduct of the coastal erosion, but according to the PondyCAN report on the Indian coasts, "loss of public and common beach space has often resulted in clashes between neighboring coastal communities."<sup>38</sup> As a result of the

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<sup>34</sup> French, P. "Coastal and Estuarine Management." *Routledge*. 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Ahana Lakshmi, Aurofilio Schiavina, Probir Banjeree, Ajit Reddy, Sunaina Mandeem, Sudarshan Rodriguez, and Deepak Apte, "The Challenged Coast of India," A report prepared by PondyCAN in collaboration with BNHS and TISS. October 2012: 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*: 54

<sup>37</sup> Rodrigues, Vinita. *Eroding and Changing Lives: A Study on the Impacts of Coastal Erosion on the Coastal Communities of Kuruchikkupam, Puducherry and Chinna Mudaliyar Chavady, Tamil Nadu*. PhD diss., Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2017. Hyderabad: 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ahana Lakshmi, Aurofilio Schiavina, Probir Banjeree, Ajit Reddy, Sunaina Mandeem, Sudarshan Rodriguez, and Deepak Apte, "The Challenged Coast of India," A report prepared by PondyCAN in collaboration with BNHS and TISS. October 2012: 54.



government promoted harbor, the coastal environment and the fishing communities in areas north of the harbor who are reliant on beaches for their livelihood have deteriorated.

While erosion has been a major force in the communities north of the harbor, fishing villages across the entire Pondicherry coast have been impacted by the increased mechanization of boats. In a report done in partnership with PondyCAN, Rachel Massey identifies the 2004 Tsunami as a major turning point from traditional style fishing to mechanized fishing. The harbor, which was largely a failed project as it brought only a small source of income for the Pondicherry territory, filled with mechanized boats that were donated by NGOs supported by the World Bank. According to Massey's report, the NGOs provided "more boats than they had fishermen." With the intent to develop the fishing sector, mechanized boats were chosen and promoted for their efficiency.<sup>39</sup> Trawler boats, which frequently carry illegal purse nets that can stretch to reach the ocean floor and have very small mesh, are particularly efficient and have grown in popularity in the Pondicherry region. However, these mechanized boats have led to an extreme decrease in fish stocks which puts stress on the already unstable income of fishing villages while encouraging others to use mechanized boats in order to compete with the efficient trawlers.<sup>40</sup> The transition to mechanized boats has been motivated by external pressures for efficiency and internal pressures to compete, and has led to the overall decrease in the stock of fish. The decrease in fish stocks creates competition within the villages, while putting stress economically and socially on individuals who engage directly and indirectly with the fishing industry.

## 2.5 Research Problem

As neoliberal ideology informs policies in which the government seeks to create an 'ideal' market structure, coastal communities are deeply impacted. Coastal erosion from man-made structures such as the Pondicherry harbor as well as the increased mechanization of boats have direct impacts on the female

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<sup>39</sup> Massey, Rachel. *Veerampattinam: A Report on the Effects of Modernization in a Traditional Fishing Community*. Report. Pondicherry Citizen's Action Network: 15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*: 25.

members of the fishing community. With limited access to capital, women are severely limited in an ideology where capital defines personal worth. As the government redesigns the fishing industry in its image, women are further estranged from capital and find themselves farther away from liberation as they work longer hours for less pay and their traditional roles in the fishing industry become obsolete.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of women in the context of neoliberal development on the Pondicherry coast, and to begin to understand their unique definition of political freedom. Political freedom is here understood as the relationship of individuals to systems of power, such as economics, community institutions, and government. How a community or individual defines political freedom implies how that community understands the role of government, of community, and of economics. Much of the literature surrounding feminist critiques of neoliberalism is abstracted from the women who experience the impacts of neoliberalism and other global ideologies, but their understanding of connections to systems of power can serve as a valuable contribution to the conversation about development and can inform policy choices that will better reflect the needs and demands of the individuals in developing communities. The experience of women, who are unequally impacted by neoliberal systems of development, provides a unique critique and insight because they make up a large portion of the traditional fisherfolk workforce, but the value of their work and their connection to livelihood is increasingly marginalized by the focus on making the fishing industry more economically efficient.

## **2.6 Methodology**

This project collected input from a variety of sources close to or within the fishing community in order to provide a holistic understanding of the fishing context in Pondicherry. This study seeks to understand the impacts of and experiences with neoliberal theory within the community, which would not be possible without the input from multiple different key actors. Therefore, data was collected from the following groups of participants:

- a) *Members of the Fishing Community* In order to understand the experience of women in the fishing communities, group interviews were conducted with a total of 35 fisherwomen, with an average of 5 women per interview. Group interviews were conducted with a total of 15 male members of the community to provide a more in-depth understanding of the shifts within the community, although priority was given to interviews with female-identifying fisherfolk. The interviews followed a semi-structured model to allow for organic conversation between the participants.<sup>41</sup> These subjects were recruited using the community connections of local Non-governmental organization PondyCAN, which works with the fishing community as one of its primary areas of interest. Women were selected based on their availability during the time slots, and time slots were chosen based on times of day in which women are most frequently available. Women from a variety of backgrounds, such as work status, age, marital status, and economic status were interviewed to ensure an intersectional approach was taken. Criteria for these subjects was that they be members of the fishing community above the age of 18.
- b) *Non-Governmental Organization Officials* In order to provide a broad context for the development of the Pondicherry coast, officials were interviewed from several non-governmental organizations such as PondyCAN and Upasana. These organizations frequently work directly with the fishing community and were able to provide valuable insight. Some information came from unstructured conversations with NGO officials, but several formal interviews were conducted. The interviews followed a semi-structured model, however, questions prepared for each organization varied based on the work the organization was familiar with.<sup>42</sup> Subjects were recruited through email or phone

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix 1 for Questionnaire

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix 2 for Questionnaire

correspondence, and the criteria was that the subjects work for an NGO which works directly with the fishing community in Pondicherry.

Subjects were informed about the project, told the role of their participation, and asked to give informed consent before any research was conducted.

The proposed study examines villages that are south of the Pondicherry harbor, making the impacts of boat mechanization a priority over the impacts of coastal erosion from man-made objects such as harbors and sea-walls. This study took place outside of the United States, in the union territory of Pondicherry, India. The main focus on this study was on the fishing village of Veerampattinam, a village just south of the harbor in which a large proportion of the population uses mechanized boats. Cultural norms were taken into account when developing this research project by consulting with individuals who have worked with fisher communities and developing the project alongside individuals who regularly conduct research in India. Research was conducted in English as much as possible, but in the case that research must be conducted in another language, materials were back-translated by a translator from PondyCAN, and that translator accompanied me on interviews to provide linguistic support. An additional translator was provided by the community of Veerampattinam to help communicate and connect with the village.

The interviews conducted for this project will be analyzed using coding methods to reveal thematic similarities between female fisherfolk and their experiences in the context of neoliberalism, their conceptions of political freedom, and/or their critiques of neoliberal development. The primary objective of interviews is to understand the experience of female fisherfolk as neoliberal policies change the landscape of the fishing industry and to begin to understand their unique definition of freedom.

### **3. Findings**

The fishing community in Pondicherry has experienced a number of large shifts in their environment and livelihood in the last several decades which have impacted women in the fishing community. The 2004 Tsunami and the subsequent social and economic impacts of intervention and

recovery have revealed that the government's priority lies in coastal development to boost economic productivity. Local government institutions are particularly subject to abuse for personal political gain and create disunity within the fishing community, while the mechanization of boats and over fishing have challenged traditional livelihoods. Within this rapidly changing environment of shifts in government attitude and mechanization, women have expressed frustration with the changes to fishing markets, the unequal nature of fishing work, and with the definition of empowerment based on economics alone.

### **3.1 Shifts in Government**

As the Indian government moves from socialism to sympathy with the push to engage in market economics, they increasingly utilize tactics in which the government is engineering society to be economically competitive and attract investment. In Pondicherry, restoration and development projects are prioritized only when they have an economic return, and government positions are perceived as being used to advance politician's personal ambition rather than to represent the people.

The shift from socialism to joining market economics has encouraged government prioritization of economic development goals. NGOs in the Pondicherry area have promoted projects in response to the harbor which has created massive beach erosion along the Pondicherry coast, but according to officials, the government does not seem to care about other incentives to restore the Pondicherry beaches beyond tourism. Among the list of reasons why beach restoration is important, such as livelihoods, saltwater incursion, and creating a barrier against storms and tsunamis, the government rarely pays much mind until the revenue from tourism is mentioned. While the NGOs feel that tourism is one of the least important reasons for beach restoration, government representatives will give far more attention to projects that include an initiative to develop the coast for tourism than those projects which do not include aspects of tourism.

Government officials are believed to promote projects which encourage the development of coasts despite the myriad of costs that doing so would have on the constituents who inhabit the coastline. One NGO official recalled a time in which they were in Delhi to promote a restoration project, and an

environmental ministry representative excitedly responded that the only way he foresaw beaches being restored is through the urbanization and gentrification of the coast. According to the representative, once the coast was developed with infrastructure that attracts the wealthy, the people who occupy the coast will want to spend money in order to restore the beaches. The same NGO official expressed frustration that market-based responses to erosion were commonly used by government representative. Tourism and economic development is perceived by the NGO as the government's top priority, a secret they either misconstrue to or hide completely from voters because "the voters are not the guys with the condos, they're the ones you are displacing."<sup>43</sup> Politicians are believed to talk about empowerment for the community while finding ways to dilute coastal regulation to increase possible investment and development despite the stress that doing so causes on communities that rely on coastal ecosystems for their livelihood and culture.

While NGOs criticized the government's emphasis on coastal economic development, fishing community members were critical of local government leaders for having created disunity within the community in order to advance their personal political and economic goals. Community members believe that politicians will use their position as a method to advance their individual political and economic ambitions, and often they will create divisions around issues within the community under the guise of party lines. The community disunity caused by ambitious politicians frustrates female and male members of the community alike because it makes mobilization against poor political representation or environmental degradation caused by the mechanized boats incredibly difficult.

### **3.2 Mechanization of the Fishing Industry**

According to NGO officials and fishing community members alike, trawlers have been promoted by the government for their efficiency in deep sea fishing and were frequently donated by well-meaning NGO interventions after the 2004 Tsunami. In other coastal states where trawlers are encouraged by the

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<sup>43</sup> Conversation with PondyCAN Official

government, trawlers have been effective in increasing efficiency in fishing. However, in Pondicherry they are a large threat to the delicate coastal ecosystem, which is not ideal for the fishing methods used by trawlers. For example, in Kerala trawlers are often used for deep sea fishing, but along India's east coast there are delicate fish breeding grounds which are disrupted by trawlers. Because of the impacts on the environment, trawlers have created an economic, environmental, and social catastrophe for fishing communities.

After the Tsunami in December 2004, organizations from across the globe gathered to provide support to affected communities. According to a report on the World Bank Response to the Tsunami Disaster, published in February of 2005, the Indian government "made it clear that it sees reconstruction as an opportunity to improve living conditions and incomes of the affected populations... this will be a central feature of the reconstruction effort."<sup>44</sup> As a part of improving the living conditions of the fishing communities, trawler boats were donated along with many other resources. The World Bank intentionally removed the upgrading or replacement of boats from their response efforts out of the fear that failing to do so would exacerbate the depletion of fish populations.<sup>45</sup> However, several of the NGOs that the World Bank was supporting continued to donate the trawlers which allowed for the number of mechanized boats to spike drastically following the Tsunami.<sup>46</sup>

Donation efforts allowed for boats to be donated in massive numbers. Each fishing village along the coast began competing for the donation efforts of NGOs and international organizations. In order to do so, they would point to the recovery of other villages and claim that their village had not received fair treatment. When the governments of coastal states became aware of this, they asked that those working to help recover the coast compare villages and their contacts in each village, and they found that it was "a

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<sup>44</sup> "World Bank Response to the Tsunami Disaster." *World Bank Archives*, February 2, 2005. Accessed December 3, 2018

<sup>45</sup> "World Bank Response to the Tsunami Disaster." *World Bank Archives*, February 2, 2005. Accessed December 3, 2018

<sup>46</sup> Conversation with PondyCAN officials

mess of miscommunication.”<sup>47</sup> As organizations clamored to help, villages became aware that they could take advantage of the situation. To this day, many fishing communities will continue to ask for assistance or donations even when they don’t need help: “even now when someone goes to visit the villagers think only of what they can give.”<sup>48</sup> In the donation efforts boats were donated graciously as each village requested they be given more assistance, despite knowledge from the World Bank that these boats would negatively impact the coastal ecosystem.

As the World Bank predicted would happen in 2004, the donation of mechanized boats led to a severe decrease in fish stocks along the Pondicherry coast which has challenged the livelihoods of the fishing community. The trawlers make it incredibly difficult for non-mechanized boats to compete for several reasons. Over fishing is one of the most apparent impacts felt by the fishing community. Mechanized boats often take the largest and highest quality catch and any excess they throw overboard as waste. Over a long period of time, however, the trawlers have depleted the fish resources so much that it has become difficult for any kind of fishing vessel to catch enough to make an income: including the trawlers themselves. Additionally, as the resources become more and more scarce, community members feel that the competition increases greatly between villages, states, and countries in the region, and it has become dangerous for fishers to cross state lines and even more so to come near to international borders. When speaking to the community members about this issue there is an overwhelming consensus between both men and women that the increase in mechanized boats has destroyed their livelihood by way of destroying the natural environment.

The communities feel unable to resist the onset of these boats because of the power of the trawler owners and the inability of the greater fishing community to unify. Those who had tried to go against the mechanized boats faced defense from trawlers owners who claimed that because the government introduced the boats and their increasing popularity, they wanted to try them and invested money that can only be repaid by using the boat. However, the feeling among those in the fishing community is that they

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



cannot resist because the traditional fishermen have such a small voice, and that the boats are owned by “VIPs,” or men with money and power. Much of the catch from the mechanized boats isn’t kept in Pondicherry or even on India’s east coast; the majority of the catch from mechanized boats is transported to Kerala to be exported. In order to resist the mechanized boats, community members feel that they would need to come together, but as local government divides them further and the central government continues to promote trawlers the community is left feeling helpless to stop the shifts the mechanized boats have caused.

### **3.3 Women’s Experience with Shifting Fishing Industry**

Traditionally the role of women in fishing is to handle the fish after the husband returns from catching. Men, who either are boat owners or work as daily hired labor on someone’s boat, will go to fish each day. After returning from sea, the men unload their catch onto the beach, where the fish are purchased by the women who will then use these fish for their own cooking and to take to fish markets to be sold at a higher price for profit. Drying, preparing, and taking the fish to market are among a few of the activities that women typically take on. The promotion of mechanized boats and subsequent over-fishing, have changed the structure of the fishing landscape for women who are a part of the industry. As they face removal from traditional activities and increased working hours, many women talk about the unequal work between them and their husbands despite their having limited control over their household income.

Not all women engage in fishing, but those who do are decreasingly involved with the activities that are typically assigned to women. As fish stocks decrease because of trawlers, there are fewer fish to dry and prepare, and only the activity of going to the market is left. One PonyCAN official believed that as the fishing industry has rapidly changed, so have the roles of men and women in the industry, and men are more frequently taking on the tasks women once had. An increasing number of women pursue other occupations, such as selling food or tailoring, because their role in fishing has become more obsolete. Those who do continue to work with fishing find that the fish markets are significantly changed as a result of mechanization.

The largest and most desirable fish are caught by the trawlers and are often exported, and this means that the fish available to women to take to market are limited. The fish which are not exported by the trawlers are auctioned near the Pondicherry Harbor, where women can go to purchase the higher quality fish which they will then take to be sold elsewhere. Because the fish stocks are depleted, there are not enough fish caught by those not working on trawlers for each person to purchase for resale. As a response, many women will go to the harbor auction to purchase fish. Rather than wake up around 6 or 7AM as they would for the traditional beach auction, the women who want to go to the harbor must wake up around 1:30AM in order to be at the harbor by the time the auction begins at 2AM. Not only do they wake up earlier, but because there are fewer fish the women make far less, typically only Rs100 or Rs200 in a day, whereas they remember making up to double that before mechanized boats become popular. This makes life for the women incredibly difficult because they must wake up early and are not able to sleep, but they are still expected to carry out all of their household tasks with a decreased income.

Women have always carried an unequal burden in fishing, but as the community faces the increasing stress of mechanization and decreasing fish stocks women feel the burden that they bear goes unnoticed. Women's traditional role in fishing is to do the vast majority of the work; each task beyond the actual catching of the fish is assigned to women. Women are increasingly detached from certain processes such as fish drying, but as they go to market earlier and make less income they carry stress from the shifts to mechanization which often is undiscussed. While men work only a few hours each morning, be those hours treacherous or not, the women must work 24 hours each day because they wake up to get to the auctions and then they must come home and do all of the household work such as cleaning, educating, and cooking. Despite the increasingly unequal hours spent working, several women expressed concern over their inability to control the household income because as stress on the community increases so does their husband's consumption of alcohol. Although they are unable to have a say in how money is spent, women take on longer hours for less pay as a result of the mechanization of boats, but these shifts felt by women are not brought up within the fishing community.

### 3.4 Perspective of Young Women Regarding Traditional Livelihood

Women are increasingly marginalized by the changes in the fishing community, but almost all girls are in school and many young women speak strong English. Many of the female youth aspire to be much more than housewives or fisherwomen, and instead want to be doctors or engineers. The culture in the community continued to demand that they follow gendered social norms,<sup>49</sup> but that notion is quickly shifting.<sup>50</sup> Although expressing admiration for their local culture and customs, young women not only want to break the mold of their traditional livelihood, but they vehemently do not want to become fisherwomen.

Young women are caught in struggle between valuing their own culture and the desire to be like the ‘prosperous’ West. According to a group of girls, their culture is something of immense value, and they appreciate that. However, girls also feel that aspects of their culture pose limits to them, such as the notion that despite their education they must marry and become housewives. This is changing quickly in the villages; young women feel that they have more opportunities and they feel that the girls will be treated with much more equality than even they are. Women are grappling to find equality within their own culture, but as they do so they also recognize that their culture is rapidly changing to be more like the culture of the West. One young woman who had just finished her plus-two schooling, the equivalent of high school, said that she felt her culture has been dying because so many people want to be rich like the United States. The same girl later snapped at her mother (“don’t act uneducated!”) for eating rice with her hands and speaking in Tamil, both typical cultural behaviors in the fishing communities. While the young women praise their culture, they criticized it when it was in action. The culture of the fishing communities does not provide the equal opportunity that the young women desire, but that culture is shifting towards both more equality and more of what is perceived to be Western behavior. Trying to find gender equality,

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<sup>49</sup> One community leader discussed the futility of young women seeking education or aspiring to be doctors because once their family marries them, they will likely become fisherwomen regardless.

<sup>50</sup> PondyCAN officials agreed that within the next 5-10 years the culture around women and girls will have visibly shifted toward equality.

valuing their cultural tradition, and wanting to be like the West has put the young women in an unusual position where they balance a large cultural shift in which tradition is equated with a lack of education.

Although the young women praised their traditional culture, when asked about their aspirations none of them had any interest in participating in traditional livelihood. All of the young women spoken to want to pursue alternative livelihoods, and all of their dreams are to become doctors or engineers. The belief among the young women is that those with education do not have to become fishers, and a part of the strive for gender equality is to open a door of career opportunities such as becoming a doctor to women in the village. Becoming a fisherwoman is undesirable to the young women because it is the career left for those who are unable to complete their education and it is rife with hard work. Young women may have a regard for their culture, but when it comes to livelihood many of them would prefer to stay far away from tradition.

The majority of the women want to become doctors or engineers because of the prestige that is associate with that career path. However, several young women expressed ambitions to pursue careers that enabled them to empower their communities. One woman first said that she wanted to be a doctor, but then later disclosed that her dream was to become a panchayat leader so that she could tackle the corruption that has prevented the community from receiving promised government support. She felt that the government prioritized making money over happiness and wanted to make a change. A second woman said that while she wanted to become a doctor she also wanted to stay in the fishing community in order to provide much needed health services as a source of empowerment. Many of the young women did expresses sentiments about their hopes of becoming a doctor or engineer for the prestige and wealth associated, but some had deeper ambitions with community-oriented goals.

### **3.5 Perceptions of Effective Empowerment**

One group of fisherwomen had the opportunity to participate in an empowerment project in which they create small dolls, called Tsunamika, which represent a symbol of hope. The project was started as a trauma counseling effort after the 2004 Tsunami and has evolved into not only a livelihood

opportunity but also provides emotional support and a sense of capability that deeply affects the women who participate. The women who contribute to the Tsunamika project feel that empowerment can be defined as much more than economic empowerment and can come from spirituality, knowledge, and hope. When empowerment is defined as more than access to economic wealth, the women feel that it has a more profound impact.

What is special about the Tsunamika project is that it allows for a woman from a very marginalized community to give something to someone who is a million times richer. The physical gift is the small Tsunamika dolls, but it's meaning is far deeper. The doll stands as a symbol of hope, and when she is given she provides hope to the receiver and to the giver. According to the project founder, "if you give a Tsunamika, we have empowered you in inspiration, which is far more powerful than giving you a few rupees."<sup>51</sup> The fisherwomen feel a deep connection to this project, and often will say that they want to continue making these dolls forever because they have never felt that they were able to give a gift to the world until the Tsunamika project. Prior to Tsunamika, their empowerment was attached only to economic wealth, but once they felt that they could use their hope as a gift for the rest of the world regardless of their lack of material wealth, they felt incredibly powerful.

These women feel that empowerment is not about material gain, but instead is about something immeasurable which money cannot provide. Their sense of empowerment comes directly from the community without any additional investment, and it spreads each day because hope is a resource that they feel they can give regardless of their economic standing. Rather than be empowered by the materially rich, the Tsunamika project enables those who are materially poor to empower not only themselves, but to spread that feeling to the materially rich. Many women's empowerment initiatives seek to provide women with occupation opportunities. However, the women who have access to a project where intervention seeks to utilize other aspects of empowerment to uplift the female community, rather

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<sup>51</sup> Conversation with Upasana Officials

than defining empowerment based on their material wealth, feel that empowerment cannot be solely tied to economics.

#### **4. Discussion**

It is difficult to determine a direct causal link between the adoption of neoliberal theory and the condition of women in the Pondicherry fishing community and applying one theoretical concept to a context will not explain every aspect of the perceived and lived experiences of those within that context. Some of the perceived shifts in the fishing community coincide with neoliberal theory, although neoliberalism is not the only ideology that may impacts the fishing communities, and many aspects of life which are possibly impacted by neoliberal thought are impacted by other ideas and concepts. The shifts in government policy and action toward promoting economic growth and free markets as well as increases in competition between individuals and communities are indicative of neoliberal ideology creating shifts in the experience of women in fishing communities. I seek to understand only the possible incidences and impacts of neoliberalism on women in the fishing community and the critics of and divergences from neoliberalism that women speak of when telling their experiences. The functioning of the state, the actions and ideas of individuals, and the connection of women to traditional livelihoods all bear resemblances to neoliberal theory; despite this, women reveal ideas which contrast sharply with neoliberalism, such as an obligation of community members to public welfare and the value and empowerment of individuals being tied to more than their proximity to material wealth.

##### **4.1 Neoliberalism and the State**

Many of the government interventions in Pondicherry appear to agree with neoliberal ideology. The central government has been increasingly sympathetic toward market tendencies since it's 1991 policy of liberalization, privatization, and globalization, and a continuous goal of the Indian Government has been to increase GDP. According to a Forbes article written earlier this year, "Many Indians are impatient for faster growth, including the governing BJP, whose Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept

office in 2014 amid chants of ‘Better Days Ahead.’”<sup>52</sup> More than desiring economic growth, the government has used the structure of a large state to drive socioeconomic reconstruction toward a more market-like society. The Indian government’s interventions in Pondicherry reflect not only a repurposing of the strong state, but they also reflect the State’s practice of self-investment and attracting investors as a means of enhancing the state’s future value.

After the 2004 Tsunami, the Indian Government used the power of the state to reconstruct the coast according to its vision for a more market-like society. According to the World Bank reports, the Indian Government had made it clear that reconstruction was an opportunity to improve living conditions and incomes of the coastal populations.<sup>53</sup> The methods to improve living conditions and incomes, however, were to promote the upgrading of boat technology in order to create a more efficient fishing industry. The priority of the state was to improve living conditions solely in economic terms. Because much of the fish from mechanized boats are used for export, it is possible that the government even had the intention to use the promotion of mechanized boats to promote exports, which has also been a long term goal of the government since the shift toward liberalization.<sup>54</sup> Mirowski had established that one of the distinguishing characteristics of neoliberalism was the repurposing of the strong state to impose “their vision of a society properly open to the dominance of the market.”<sup>55</sup> In the case of Tsunami recovery, the strong state was used to create a more efficient and therefore more competitive and market-like fishing industry.

In addition to using the tsunami recovery as a method to reconstruct the fishing industry, the Indian government has further repurposed the state in order to promote a vision of the Indian coast in which tourism is intended to be a form of self-investment for future state worth. According to Wendy

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<sup>52</sup> Babones, Salvatore. "India Will Outgrow China In 2018 But Must Invest in Next-Generation Value Chains to Succeed." *Forbes*, January 2, 2018. Accessed December 7, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> "World Bank Response to the Tsunami Disaster." *World Bank Archives*, February 2, 2005. Accessed December 3, 2018

<sup>54</sup> Babones, Salvatore. "India Will Outgrow China In 2018 But Must Invest in Next-Generation Value Chains to Succeed." *Forbes*, January 2, 2018. Accessed December 7, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Mirowski, Phillip. "Neoliberalism: The Movement That Dare Not Speak Its Own Name." *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018). Accessed October 10, 2018.

Brown, neoliberalism pushes “both persons and states [to be] construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors.”<sup>56</sup> Tourism projects are meant to attract consumers and to build new coastal communities of those who are able to afford the cost of beach property, while simultaneously encouraging resort and tourism companies to expand their enterprises to the Pondicherry and Indian coastline. That the government is reluctant to support projects without an aspect of bolstering tourism and economic growth is an indicator that tourism is the state’s top priority. The goal of the state’s interest in promoting tourism is to increase jobs and eventually contribute to the growth of GDP. In other terms, their goal is to maximize the capital value of the Indian State by relying on self-investment and entrepreneurialism.

When tourism is the state’s top priority because of its contribution to the state’s economic value, all other purposes for coastal restoration, such as livelihood preservation or protection natural disasters, are used as a method to protect current investments or increase investment in the future. Beach preservation is only considered valuable when it enables industry growth. Neoliberalism reframes the state as a firm seeking to increase its capital value, and like a company that uses its sustainability as a marketing ploy, the government can advertise their sustainability to attract consumers and investors. For example, the government seems to be protecting the beaches of Pondicherry in order to advertise the pristine beaches with the hope that doing so will attract investors in the form of resorts, cruises,<sup>57</sup> and eventually tourists. Rather than prioritizing beach restoration for its ecological and social importance, beach restoration is prioritized for the sake of increasing industrial competitiveness and attracting investors.

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<sup>56</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 36.

<sup>57</sup> In a conversation with PondyCAN officials, it was mentioned that there is currently a project proposed which would create a cruise line from Chennai to Pondicherry



## 4.2 Neoliberalism and the Self

Shifts in the Indian government that resemble neoliberalism have coincided with social shifts among individuals within the fishing communities. In the neoliberal definition of the individual, there is a “subtle shift from exchange to competition as the essence of the market means that all market actors are rendered as little capitals competing rather than exchanging with one another.”<sup>58</sup> Rather than individuals functioning in a system of collective exchange, the restructuring of the individual around economic lines creates a system of competition in which the individual is constantly seeking that which will put them in a more competitive position. Individuals in the fishing communities seek to gain material wealth in order to match a western standard of living, and as a product competition between individuals and villages has increased in a variety of ways. Similar to what neoliberal theory predicts, the pursuit of education, training, consumption, etc. have become methods of individual advancement while concern with the common good has decreased.

Individuals increasingly compete for access to material wealth, and in the process competition challenges notions of equality, empowerment, and community unity. After the global outreach to support the fishing community following the 2004 tsunami, the fishing community began to consistently request support from outsiders, even when they did not require additional support. Although fishing has consistently provided inconsistent incomes and community members feel they live in constant questioning of their survival, part of this shift toward relying on the assistance of outsiders is the product of a community which has begun to strive for a western standard of living in which all people are materially wealthy. This desire has led to the assumption that material wealth is equated with success, and as organizations continued to donate to those who asked for assistance, individuals began to compete for the most compelling story to justify receiving aid. By using their socioeconomic situation as a form of self-investment and entrepreneurialism, individuals in the fishing community began to frame themselves as an investment in order to advance their future worth. This phenomenon, discussed by Brown, unravels

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<sup>58</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 36.

hope of an equal society because when individuals become capitals competing with one another, inequality becomes the medium and relation between individuals and “equality ceases to be our presumed natural relation with one another.”<sup>59</sup> As individuals compete with one another to gain material resources, they pose a detriment to a community in which individuals can have any status of equality, and they empower the outsiders who they are reliant on to provide. Through this empowerment, the entire community is disempowered by relinquishing power to the outsider, while also destroying the presumption of equality between villages. As the villages become less equal, disunity and competition run rampant, and it becomes less and less likely that community action can be taken to address situations like over-fishing.

Competition can be a mechanism for survival in the face of scarce resources, but when competition between individuals is a matter of advancing personal social, economic, or political positioning it alienates the individual from concern with the public good. When self-worth is defined as a zero-sum game attached to competitive positioning, “the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good.”<sup>60</sup> While community members frustrated with local politicians may have an incentive to frame them as corrupt, those who do use government positions as a place of personal economic and political gain rather than to benefit those they represent are a clear example of this. The collective needs of the community become secondary to the politician whose goal is to strategically advance their own position. Similarly, while continued investment in trawlers may be the product of a need to survive due to rapidly decreasing fish resources, if individuals are continuing to invest in trawlers out of a desire to compete with the productivity of other trawler-owners, then they too put their competitive positioning above the common good. Any incentive to remove oneself from a concern for the common good contributes to the stress on the Pondicherry fishing community as it grapples with over-fishing and increasing mechanization of boats.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 39.

Additionally, when the role of the individual shifts from an exchange to competition, all decisions become strategic ones in order to advance one's own position. The closer the individual resembles competitive capital, the more "the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value"<sup>61</sup> Young women in the fishing community may be incentivized to pursue other livelihoods because the fishing industry has made the role of women increasingly obsolete while also making it increasingly difficult to earn an income by participating in women's roles in the fishing industry. However, a contributing factor to many young women's aspiration to become doctors or engineers was the prestige that those specific careers entail. The pursuit of education and alternative livelihood can quickly become a maneuver to advance the position of the individual over others. Young women are particularly vulnerable to this because their traditional livelihood as women in the fishing community is in question due to practices of over-fishing and mechanization.

#### **4.3 Women and Neoliberalism**

The Women in Development paradigm frames the materially wealthy West as the ideal to be strived for, and its ideas of women's inclusion are based on economic inclusion. While WID is not explicitly neoliberal, it understands empowerment as closeness to material wealth, which implies that individuals are best off when they are materially wealthy. Neoliberalism also agrees with the notion that individuals are best off when they are situated closely to material wealth because material wealth puts individuals in a competitive position. These notions diminish the value of the materially not wealthy, and because that which is tradition does not typically agree with that which is competitive or efficient, these notions also diminish the value of tradition. The combination of the WID paradigm and neoliberalism poses a precarious situation for women who rely on traditional livelihoods by framing them as both uncompetitive and unmodern. Women are encouraged distance from their traditional livelihoods in order

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid: 34

to be competitive. To be 'modern' and have access to material wealth is a method of self-investment that encourages young women to outwardly reject their connection to the traditional.

The desire to emulate the culture of those who are materially 'on top' devalues traditional culture and livelihood because as the values, lifestyles, and standard of living of those 'on top' are accepted they frame the values, lifestyles, and standards of living of those not on top as lesser. Young women in the fishing community pointed out that they noticed their culture becoming less prominent as people began to strive to be "rich like America." However, the same young women were also critical of their culture when in the presence of an American, and at one point they told their mother to stop be 'uneducated.' The uneducated actions in question were behaviors considered tradition in Pondicherry, such as eating with hands and not speaking in English. Part of this reaction is likely due to my presence and the girls' desire to impress their guest, but it nonetheless displayed a feeling of shame associated with appearing traditional, which was equated with being uneducated. If others in the community were being drawn toward the culture of the United States and the West, it isn't out of the question that these young women also shared the desire to live the life of luxury that the West connotes. In the process, the young women unconsciously demean their own culture even as they are critical of the loss of culture they feel.

As the life of the West is widely sought after and traditional culture is demeaned, part of the competition that individuals are incentivized to engage in is to reject local tradition of culture. Some feminist theories would consider this a direct attack on women because when development is equated with the economic growth necessary to imitate the lifestyle of the West it creates a struggle between the traditional and the modern. The traditional is attributed to femininity while the modern is attributed to masculinity, and in the process of modernization tradition becomes the antithesis of efficiency. The woman who relies on and represents tradition is the direct contradiction of the modern state, and so she bears the weight of this devaluation of traditional culture. In the fishing communities, none of the young women interviewed wanted to be fisherwomen. This is certainly in part due to the low and unstable income but may also be attributed to the lack of prestige which encourages many of the young women to aspire to more attractive careers such as doctors or engineers. The traditional work of the Pondicherry

fisherwoman is delegitimized by the demand, both by individuals and the government, to be modern, and in order to be considered competitive the young woman distances herself from tradition.

#### **4.4 Contradictions to Neoliberalism**

Because the fisherwomen had a diversity in thought, and some were far more open about their opinions than others, it is difficult to establish a singular alternative definition of political freedom from that which is put forth by neoliberalism. However, many of the women expressed opinions and desires which contradicted neoliberal notions. The demand for greater community unity and a collective responsibility for group well-being and the definition of empowerment as something greater than economic empowerment reveal aspects of a definition of political freedom within the female community which resists neoliberalism.

Whereas neoliberalism's rendering of the individual and the political in economic terms leads to the disappearance of collective responsibility for the common good, many Pondicherry fisherwomen expressed a critique of group disunity and the lack of concern for public welfare. Several women revealed frustration with the disunity caused by scarce resources and increased competition between individuals and communities. This disunity disabled the entire fishing community to unite to combat a common struggle: mechanization and the subsequent over-fishing. Boat owners who continue to use their trawlers were critiqued for their use of the boats regardless of the impacts that doing so had on the wellbeing of the whole. While these boat owners were given some grace because of the economic hardship of repaying the loans necessary to purchase a mechanized boat, they implied frustration that these boats continue to grow in popularity despite the apparent negative impacts on the community welfare. Additionally, several of the young women expressed that their ambition was based not solely on the betterment of themselves, but on the betterment of the community. By becoming local government leaders or doctors who provide care to community members who otherwise would have no access, these young women want to dedicate their lives to improving the condition of the community as a whole. These fisherwomen believe in the importance of collective responsibility, which not only contradicts the disappearance of concern for

common wellbeing, but it also denotes a critique of the greater neoliberal ideology. If the individual is rendered in economic terms, “equality ceases to be [their] natural relation with one another.”<sup>62</sup>

Neoliberalism’s competitive individual does not care about the common welfare because their focus is on their own strategic positioning within society. A concern for the welfare of the society as a whole unravels the notion that individuals must be in constant competition and implies that individuals must rely on a system of exchanges with one another and their environment.

Those with access to the Tsunamika project revealed that their empowerment was the product of something greater than economic empowerment or material gain. Empowerment as defined by these women is something far greater than increased proximity to material wealth, but can be instead increased proximity to knowledge, spirituality, or hope. Expanding the definition of empowerment to include other aspects beyond economics implies that individuals can be valuable despite being materially not wealthy. When these women felt that their value was attached to their economic condition they felt useless but knowing that because they have hope and that their hope can be given as a gift to the rest of the world makes these women feel more powerful than any number of rupees ever could. When the value of the individual is expanded beyond the proximity to wealth, states which are not materially wealthy can also be considered valuable despite their distance from material wealth. As the definition of empowerment is expanded to include a variety of possible conditions which may be empowering, the competition to reach the center of economic power loses its potency. The individual and the state are no longer defined based on their economic growth or their competitive position, but are instead valued based on the knowledge, spirituality, or hope that they contribute to a global community.

## 5. Conclusion

This study attempted to understanding the experience of Pondicherry fisherwomen in the context of neoliberal development. It is difficult to discern the precise existence of neoliberalism in Pondicherry

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 38.

because of the diverse set ideas and practices that influence the behavior of both individuals and the government, but there are some shifts within the fishing community which resemble closely the ideology of neoliberals and the predictions that theorists believe result from neoliberalism in practice. The government has prioritized projects which advance the economic development of the coast regardless of their environmental or social cost. This has led to the mechanization and development of the fishing industry and an emphasis on tourism, and over fishing, erosion, and loss of beaches have impacted the fishing community.

Within the shifting context, women expressed frustration with changes to the fishing markets, the inherent gendered inequality in fishing work, and the definition of empowerment as being attached to economic value. The actions of the state, the actions of individuals in the fishing community, and the decreasing connection of women to traditional livelihood all resemble neoliberalism; however, many women revealed ideas that contrasted with neoliberalism. The demand for greater community unity and collective responsibility and the definition of empowerment as something other than proximity to material wealth reveal aspects of a definition of political freedom within the female fishing community. This implies that as the fishing industry shifts and begins to resemble neoliberal theory, women, who are among the most marginalized by the shifts, continue to believe in a theory autonomous from neoliberalism. By teaching collective responsibility in the home, maintaining connections throughout the community, and partaking in empowerment schemes which promote spiritual or intellectual empowerment these women can and do resist the encroachment of neoliberal ideas. The government, which claims to be representative, could better support coastal development by understanding the contradictions that the female fisherwomen understanding of political freedom has with neoliberalism.

## **5.1 Limitations and Recommendations**

This study was limited by several factors which indicate the need for future study. The largest constraint was time, as this study took place over the course of four weeks. A language barrier posed a significant limitation to this study. Although accompanied by a translator who graciously provided

linguistic support, many group interviews could not be fully translated into English because conversation flowed so freely among the participants. Both of the translators I was accompanied by were also male, which may have posed a challenge to gaining information from the female members of the community because of the added power dynamic between male and female persons. Some female community members may not have felt comfortable sharing information directly with a male translator, and the translators may not have translated something if it painted the male community members in poor light. Additionally, some statements and opinions could not be translated directly, and some data was surely lost or misconstrued in the translation process.

A lack of time prevented me from establishing strong rapport with the fishing community, and although they appeared to share their stories with candor, with a deeper and more long-term relationship more data could have been collected. Similarly, because of the small window of time in which this study was conducted the sample population may not be representative of the overall population of fisherwomen. Many of the ideas shared by women that were formed into conclusions in this study came from only a few women, and those ideas may not be shared by the majority of the population despite being shared by the women that I was able to speak with. In order to solidify the validity of my conclusions, further research with the same intention should be conducted.



## Appendices

### *Appendix 1*

#### **Questions for Fishing Community**

1. Do you contribute to the Fishing industry?
  - a. (Women) Do you dry fish (Why/Why not)
  - b. Do you enjoy your work (Why/Why not)?
2. How long have you been doing this?
3. (Tsunamika communities) How has Tsunamika impacted your life?
4. Have you noticed changes since the mechanized boats have been used?
5. Do these changes impact your work?
  - a. How do you feel about these changes?
  - b. What was it like before?
6. (Women) Before, what was it like coming to the markets? How have they changed?
7. How does the fisheries department support you?
8. (Women) Does contributing to household income impact your independence?
  - a. Do you have a say in how money is spent?
  - b. What kind of household choices can you make?
9. If your you (your husband) were able to switch boats, would you want (him) to?
  - a. How would this impact your life?

### *Appendix 2*

#### **Questions for Upasana Officials**

1. How many women participate in Tsunamika?
2. How much income does Tsunamika provide?
3. Does the income made by women stay in their control, or does it contribute to household income which is controlled by the husband?
4. Where does income come from if the dolls are a part of the gift economy?
5. What other benefits does Tsunamika bring to coastal communities?
6. What kinds of trauma does the Tsunamika project help women to overcome since the tsunami recovery?

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