

Histories and Futures of Gendered Seafood Market Spaces

A Case Study of Pitipana Fish Market, Negombo, Sri Lanka

Nadiya Azmy, Gayathri Lokuge and Shaneendra Amarasinghe





Contextualising Negombo and Pitipana

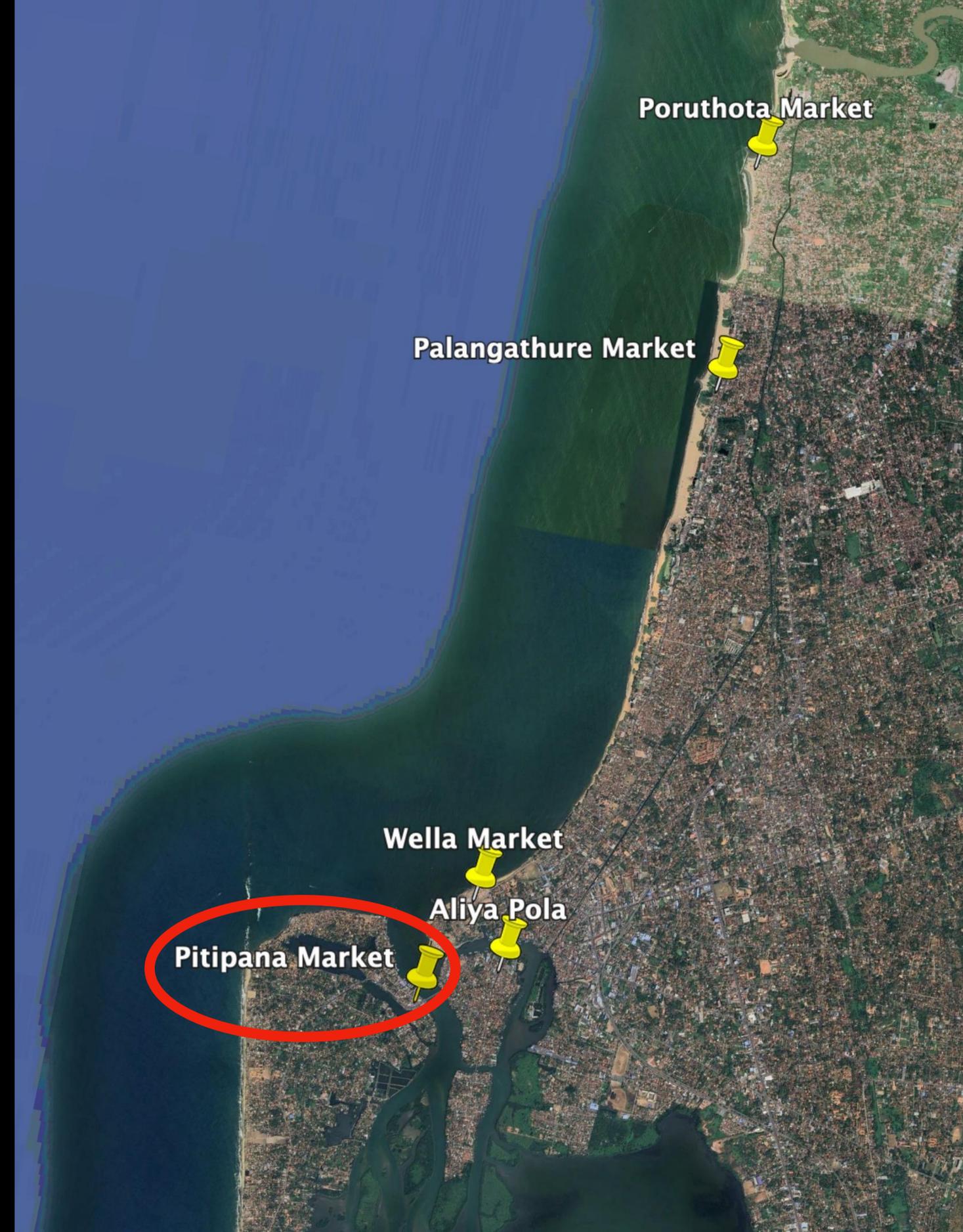
Pitipana as a Lens into Space, Power, and Gender



Poruthota (Close to the coast and dryish and processing operations)



Palangathure (Predominantly women)



- Pitipana chosen for focus: **long history, visible exclusions, illustrative spatial reorganisation.**
- Research lens: **Feminist Economic Geography** → **spatial reorganisation, masculinised value chains, women's negotiations of power.**

Space-Power Nexus: Reading Market Geographies Together

Framing Space and Power

- **Space** is never neutral → relational, socially produced, always in process (Massey, 2005).
Women sell in the open corridors, shifting under the roof only after men leave.
- **Place** is meaningful → socially constructed, and porous, (Oberhauser et al., 2018).
The roof becomes a place of exclusion and male authority, while the corridor becomes the tolerated, marginal site for women.
- **Scale** is contested → power works differently at the body and market level.
Women's bodies are disciplined — where they can sit, how long they can remain, even whether their presence is considered “respectable.”
- **Power** is never static → emergent, relational, contextual (Allen, 2003, 2016).
Women's legitimacy depends on time of day and men's presence. Space is negotiated moment by moment — tolerated only when men have moved out.
- **Together:** Market spaces are **gendered configurations of power**, where access is continually negotiated through the corridor/roof divide.

Research Questions

Asking How Gender, Space, and Power Intersect

- How and why do fish-market spaces become gendered?
- How do norms & institutions shape women's roles and mobility?
- How do women sustain supply chains despite exclusion?
- How do men capture profitable/high-value spaces?
- How is power emergent, relational, contextual across scales?

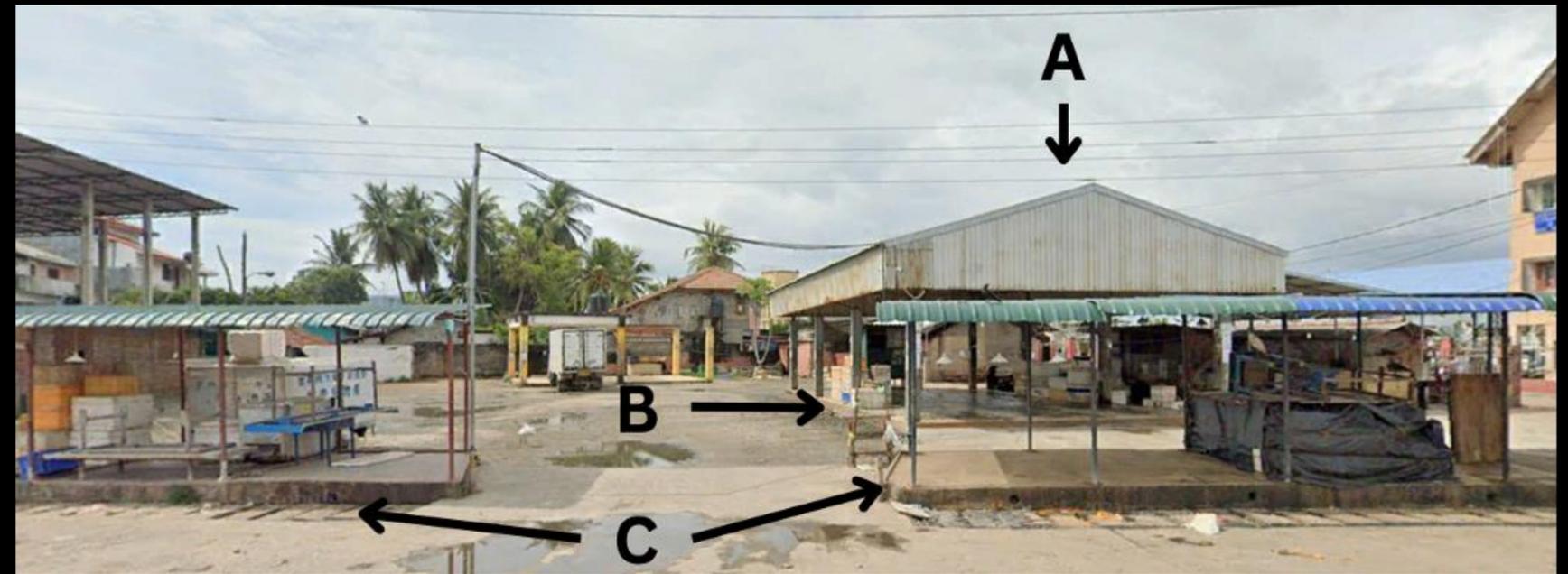
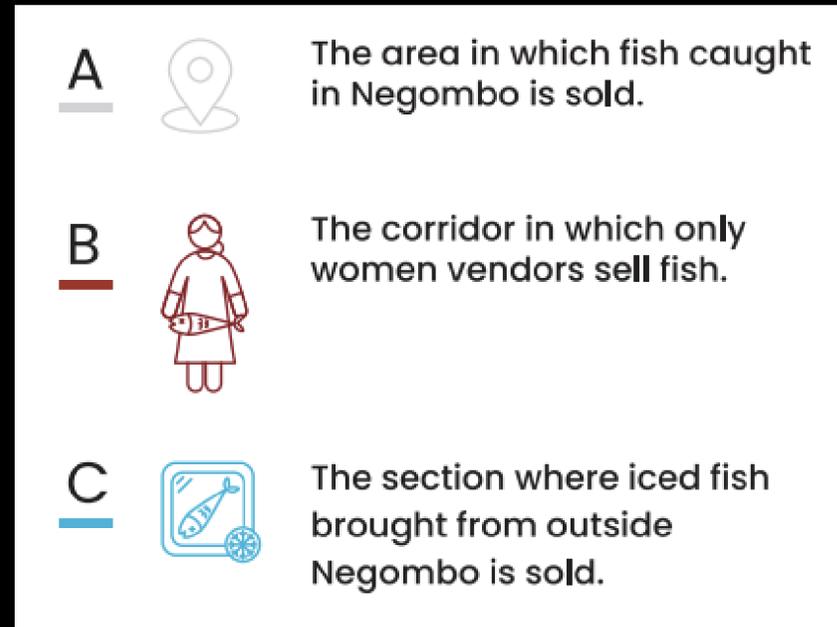
Locating Pitipana

Map: Pitipana Market and surrounding markets



Inside Pitipana: Gendered Spatial Divisions

Corridors, Stalls, and Exclusion in Everyday Practice



B: Women sellers in the roofless corridors



Before the Shift: Women at the Centre of Fish Trade

- Historically fish trading in the West and Northwestern coasts was dominated by women
 - “Once the nets were cleared the women went off to market, while the men wondered home to eat, sleep or drink arrack” (Stirrat, 1988)
- Stirrat describes the split between fishing and fish selling to have been a part of a **culturally approved** division of labour, which was beginning to **diminish in the early 80s.**

Drivers that shape spatial (re)configuration

- Mechanisms of change
- Norms, respectability and safety
- Marginalisation through social and economic institutions



Mechanisms of Change

Global and Local Shifts Reshaping Market Spaces

1. Globalisation of value chains

- Expanded reach: fish from **outside Negombo** enters local markets, reshaping the **space** of trade.
- Emergent **masculinisation**: outsider men dominate; women marked as “**unsuitable**” or **unsafe**.
- Global flows reorganised the **local place** of the market, producing exclusions at the intersection of **global capital and gender norms**.

2. Mechanisation (Multi-day boats)

- Restructured physical and social spaces of harbour and market.
- **Emergent and relational**: **men with capital and networks gained access**; women couldn't access higher-value catch.
- Mechanisation masculinised labour and trade, showing how **technology and capital reshape scale** (from household to market to global).

3. Auction systems (~20 yrs)

- Auction hall became a new **spatial node** — roofed, male-dominated, exclusionary; women relegated to corridors.
- **Relational and contextual**: **auctions favoured those with capital and alliances**; women consistently outbid and priced out.
- Auctions demonstrate how new systems **produce emergent power relations** while continually reorganising access to space.

Norms, Respectability & Safety

Respectability Politics and the Discipline of Women's Bodies

- Market reframed as **vulgar/unsafe** with outsider men
- Husbands discouraged wives; **'respectable'** women withdrew
- Remaining women = **widows** or with **no alternatives**
- Respectability politics reorganised space by **disciplining women's bodies** → shaping who could remain, when, and under what terms.
- Norms reorganised the market. Women's bodies became disciplined: where they could sit, when they could enter, and under what terms they were tolerated. Power was exercised not just through rules, but through moral regulation of presence and absence.
- *"I used to sell inside the market. I sell outside now as the space inside is used for auctioning. Our presence inside is a bother to men... when they leave, we move inside to a place with a roof."*
- Here the roof becomes a metaphor for legitimacy and privilege, while the corridor becomes a space of containment and exclusion. Access to the roof is contextual — women are only allowed in once men vacate — showing how space is constantly negotiated, and how power is relational, tied to time of day and social position.

Marginalisation through social & economic institutions

How Norms Translate into Economic Marginalisation

- From Social to Economic Exclusion
 - Respectability politics **limited women's mobility** → confined to **low-value niches** in markets.
- Institutional scale
 - Fisheries societies tied membership, pensions, and welfare to men
 - “We give a pension for 130 members- Rs. 40,000 monthly, 10 kg rice annually, Rs. 25,000 for a heart attack, Rs. 10,000 for a funeral.” – FGD participant, Pitipana Fisheries Society
- Space–Power Nexus
 - Exclusion operated across **scales of space** (market corridors, societies).
 - Power was **relational (alliances in societies)**, **contextual (rules of access)**, and **emergent (new exclusions from pensions and benefits)**.

Futures of market spaces

Uncertain Pathways for Women Traders

- **Market spaces are shaped across scales-** local norms, national institutions, and global value chains. Each reorganisation has reduced women's presence, pushing them to the margins.
- Today, women mostly sell low-value fish in corridors, tolerated only at certain times. Their exclusion reflects **space as always in process, continually remade through power-laden interactions.**
- Younger women are turning to garment factories and other wage work - **pull factors** at different scales - while the market itself has become an unsafe, masculinised space, deterring their entry.
- **Futures are precarious:** power is contextual — what women can do depends on who is present, when, and under what terms. Their legitimacy in the market is always contingent.

Thank you!