

Fisherwomen of the East Coastal India: A Study

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Abstract

This article is a hypothetical study of fisherwomen from the Coastal areas of West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu to highlight social, economic, political, education and health related issues. Fishing is a major industry in coastal states of India but still the coastal fishworkers have been one of the most vulnerable groups among the poor in India. Fisheries are an important sector of food production, providing dietetic supplement to the food along with contributing to the agricultural exports and engaging about fourteen million people in different activities. With diverse resources ranging from deep seas to fresh waters, the country has shown constant increments in fish production since independence. Women, who constitute approximately half of India's population (49%) play vital role in these fisheries. The contributions of the fisherwomen penetrate every aspect of post-harvest handling, preservation, processing and marketing of seafood products and provide an integral link between producers and consumers. Increase in competition, decaying resources and complex working conditions make work challenging for the fisherwomen. Among fisherwomen mobility is limited; hence they need some eco-friendly technologies, which could provide additional income to the family. Women entrepreneurs need to be encouraged in the fishing industry.

Keywords: Fisherwomen, Issues, Entrepreneurs, Self Help Groups, Empowerment

Introduction

India stands second in the world in total fish production, after China, with a production of 7.3 million tons in 2007 (Source: FishStat, FAO, 2009). The annual per capita consumption of fish in India was estimated at 4.8 kg in 2003.

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Fish is especially important for the everysegment of the population providing acost-effective and easily reached source of protein and essential micronutrients. A large section of the population depends on fish resources (both marine and inland) for their livelihoods, employment and income. Fisheries sector contributes significantly to the national economy while providing a good source of revenue to approximately 14.49 million people in the country. Presently, fisheries and aquaculture contribute 1.04% of the national GDP and 5.34% of agriculture and allied activities.

Fish trade is a traditional occupation that has been a means of livelihood for thousands in India with the majority of fish vendors being women. Unlike men, whose labor is largely confined to the sea, river or lake; fisher women vendors have to travel with their product to market places. They have to cooperate with both the public and the law. In the process, they are often forced to deal with inherited prejudices and problems of various kinds. Along with being engaged in household chores from dawn to dusk, fisherwomen play an important role in retailing, auctioning, sorting, grading, curing and drying, prawn peeling and collection of seaweed apart from hand-braiding and repair of nets.

The role of the women in fishing is largely relies on the socio-economic conditions of the households. Overall, the conditions and quality of life for women is deprived across different fishing groups and communities. This included long working hours, poor wages as compared to the men and in addition the burden of household maintenance. However various problems are faced by fisherwomen, still they expressed interest to learn new skills and attend trainings to improve their status in the fishing sector to empower themselves.

Fishing Communities in India

According to International Collective in Support of fishworkers (ICSF), fishing communities in India are not homogenous, as they belong to different castes. These communities have their distinct social and cultural authority structures and traditional practices which depend on the coast to where they inhabit.

The fishing community institutions mostly organized along caste, relationship or religious lines plays an important role in resolving conflicts, besides regulating and allocating resource use, ensuring equitable access to resources and providing some form of social insurance. Some of the important fishing communities in Indian East Coastal states are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Fishing Communities in Major East Coast States of India

	State Fishing	Communities
	Andhra Pradesh	Vada Balijas, Jalaris, Pattapu ,Palles, Neyyala
	Odisha	Jalaris, Vadabalijas, Kaibartas, Khandayats and Rajbhansis
	Tamil Nadu	Pattinavars, Mukkuvars and Paravas
	West Bengal	Kaibartas

Source: ICSF Website

Role of Fisher Women in East Coastal States in India

Table 2 shows the role played by fisherwomen in East coast of India

Table 2: Role of Fisherwomen in East Coast States of India

States	Role of women in fisheries
West Bengal	Participation of women is very negligible and limited to retail marketing, and net mending
Odisha	Along with net-making and fish marketing, fisherwomen engage themselves in shrimp processing.
Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu	Limited role in capture fisheries like seed collection, clam collection handpicking of fish. Active participation in allied activities such as sorting, grading, fish salting and drying, fish loading and unloading, netmending, retail marketing and fish processing.

West Bengal

In West Bengal, the participation of women in fisheries is less. The number of days spent on actual fishing in a year is relatively low; hence men tend to engage themselves in additional activities such as net-making and net-mending, which in the other Indian east coast states are the domain of women.

Some women in the West Bengal villages are involved in fishing shrimps using hand-held nets in rivers and estuaries. In spite of their tremendous workload fisherwomen get scanty reward and recognition.

A very low percentage of girls get an opportunity to go to school. It is felt that the main obstacle to greater involvement of women in rural coastal areas in fisheries development is the very low rate of literacy and the total lack of training facilities.

Odisha

In Odisha fish drying, curing, fish marketing, net-making and shrimp processing are the most important activities in which women from fishing communities are engaged. Women are also involved in creek- or shallow-water-based operations, such as crab and shell fishing and rarely in cast net operations. Management of small ponds in the confined water prawn culture system as seen in Lake Chilka SHGs are coming forward for widening or intensifying participation by women in fisheries activities.

Andhra Pradesh

In the state of Andhra Pradesh, the main commercial activities of women in the fishing villages are fish drying, curing and fish marketing. Hand braiding of fishing nets is also an important activity in many fishing villages. In recent years, with the establishment of shrimp processing plants in Visakhapatnam and East Godavari districts, women are obtaining jobs in the shrimp processing industry in increasing numbers. In the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, women get employment in shrimp farms for 4 to 5 months in a year for activities like pond construction, seed collection and segregation, de-weeding of pond and hand picking of shrimp during harvest. Women do not participate in marine fish capture.

In a few places along the coast, women are seasonally engaged in collecting molluscs and shells along with drying/selling the same in the local markets.

A number of women cooperative societies have been established in Srikakulam district and the establishment of cooperatives in Visakhapatnam district are contemplated. The purpose of these cooperative societies is to organize women for hand braiding of fishing nets, supply of twine, etc.

Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, fish drying/curing and fish marketing are the two main areas in which women are involved in both the marine and inland fisheries sectors.

While women are engaged in drying and curing fish all along the coast, it is in the marine districts of Ramnad, Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari and Thanjavur that they play a predominant part in the sun-drying of fish on the beaches and in the curing of fish in fish-curing yards.

Marketing of fish, including the auctioning and purchase at fish landing centre, and retail marketing of fresh and dried fish in roadside stalls and in village and town markets, is the domain of women especially in the northern districts of Chennai, Chingleput and South Arcot. Hand-braiding and mending of nets is a third important area of women's involvement in ancillary industries, especially in Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli districts.

The scope for further involvement of women in such activities as drying and curing of fish and hand braiding of fishing nets is limited; in the latter case, it has become difficult for women to compete with machine-made nets in commercial plants.

The lack of educational facilities for women in small-scale fishing communities is the main handicap to greater participation by them.

Fisherwomen Empowerment

Empowerment is a process of acquiring rights, self development and self realization through independent decision making.

Thus when we speak of women empowerment, it means providing social, economical, political, educational rights, so as to give them a status in par with men.

The average Indian fishing family today finds it difficult to earn a livelihood throughout the year. Therefore, the vast potential available among the unemployed fisherwomen needs to be tapped, which can be done by making them capable of doing something remunerative on their own. This however requires that the women are motivated, have a degree of awareness, the ability to think critically and take decisions and above all possess a measure of self esteem. This power has to be acquired, sustained and exercised.

The Vulnerability of Fisher Women

1. **Education and training:** The low literacy rate amongst women restricts them to utilize world class skills required in competitive business environment. Besides, extension services are dominated by males, and male-female contact is not allowed socially.
2. **Poor Housing and Sanitation:** The fishing villages are often remote and inaccessible, and with unproductive lands that are also subject to sea erosion. Basic facilities such as drinking water and health services are often missing.
3. **Health:** Nutritional Food is a vital factor determining health. Fisher women in India generally suffer from malnutrition and dietary imbalances. Cereals and fish comprise the major portion of the diet, and hence only 75 per cent of the calorie and 50 per cent of the protein needs are met (Srinath, 1987).
Commonly seen disorders are malnutrition and vitamin A and B complex deficiency (Devadas and Nirmala Murty, 1979) apart from ailments like gastroenteritis and allergic bronchitis. Women are worst affected and this is reflected by the imbalance in the sex ratio and their lower life expectancy.
4. **Physical mobility:** Women in some fishing communities are not permitted to work outside the home or with men folk. This is closely linked to religion, class or caste to which the household belongs. Such socio-cultural restrictions limit women's contribution to household income and narrow down options for employment and income sources.
5. **Access to credit.** In general, women have less access to credit or financing sources due to the various socio-cultural restrictions and low literacy.
Lack of possession over assets makes it difficult to procure loans from banks/ financial institutions.
6. **Marketing Problems:** Fisher women face the problem of marketing their products. Lack of marketing strategies, no liaison with SHGs in interior urban markets, lack of imagination and coordination constrains their marketing efforts.
7. **Entrepreneur Development Programme:** Entrepreneurs Development Programmes provided by the government remain more in theory than in practice for many reasons. Due to marketing problems, the SHG members have not attained self-sufficiency in entrepreneurial activities.
8. **Impact of technology:** The introduction of machines in fishing industry seems to have benefited fisherwomen in some areas, as reported by Gulati (1979); it has had an adverse effect in many other parts of the country.

For example, the introduction of mechanized fishing in Vypeen Island (Srinath, 1986) and the introduction of automation in net making (Vivekanandan, 1988) have reduced employment opportunities for fisherwomen considerably.

Major Issues Confronted by Fisherwomen

Social

In fishing community women play either a role of a housewife or as a source of income generator through fishing jobs. Involvement of women in the primary sectors of capture fisheries is negligible (mostly in the margin while trading their catch and are largely engaged in peripheral activities like cleaning and drying of the catch which renders low wages) hence they have to deal with the deplorable household situation due to decreasing fish catch and downsized income. Women who are involved in marketing face many problems like fluctuating market prices, unhygienic market places, lack of basic amenities in the market place.

Economic

Economic uplift of the fisherwomen mainly depends on the growth and development of fisheries sector.

Hence, location oriented and resource based developmental schemes are required to be implemented for each region which would help in area planning for socio-economic improvement of fisherwomen in any work sector can be found occupying the position of asub category or performing supportive roles. At landing centers women engaged in fish drying collects small sized by-catches. In Kerala there are 2703 fishmarkets comprising 185 wholesale and 2518 retail outlets which includes 1126 wayside markets (Anon., 2000). In markets women usually sell low value products in a remote corner. Wholesalers among women are very few. Lack of alternate employment in off-season lead to many complications. They are forced to borrow money usually from private moneylenders at very high interest rate of 10%/month or even more. Though they work hard in peak season, they can hardly pay back the money, as it would have doubled by then. The vicious circle of indebtedness continues. The problem is not the lack of opportunities but is of unawareness about the avenues.

In West Bengal there are no special schemes to improve the social and economic conditions of women in small-scale fishing communities. Nor are there any posts that specifically relate to women.

Opportunities for women in fisheries could be enlarged in the field of integrated aquaculture, fishery estates, marine products processing, manufacture and export development, management of fishery infrastructure, marketing and export as well as in research and technology development.

Education

Literacy is considered as an indicator of development however the literacy level of the fisherwomen is very low. Low literacy incapacitates their bargaining capacity in the trader dominant market thus divesting them of their reasonable price compensation for the risky endeavors in the marine environment. They remain unaware of the new technologies and innovations

Health: The fisherwomen carry loads of fish from the shore or ports to the nearest markets every day. The women carry the fish on their head and with the load of 35-40 kgs, the pressure comes on their body, especially back. The subsistence fisherwomen are prone to health hazards like diarrhea, cholera and fever. Nutrition is a crucial factor determining health. Fisherwomen in India generally suffer from malnutrition and dietary imbalances.

Cereals and fish comprise the major portion of the diet, and hence only 75 per cent of the calorie and 50 per cent of the protein needs are met (Srinath, 1987).

Commonly seen disorders are malnutrition and vitamin A and B complex deficiency (Devadas and Nirmala Murty, 1979) apart from ailments like gastroenteritis and allergic bronchitis. Women are the worst affected and this is reflected by the imbalance in the sex ratio and their lower life expectancy.

Benefits of Women's Participation in Fisheries

On the contrary, women's participation is changing with the mounting pressure on land and water resources, environmental degradation, out-migration of male family members and increasing rural poverty.

Integrating gender in aquaculture:

- Benefits women through an increase in household income and improvement in nutrition (practical needs/efficiency goal);
- Helps women gain control over their own livelihoods and improve their status both within the household and the community (strategic needs/empowerment).
- Improved access to income and livelihood options
- Higher household income due to added human capital inputs in aquaculture
- Increased participation in various decision-making processes within the family.

To ensure better involvement of women in aquaculture development as well as improve the economic condition of women, the following aspects are to be considered:

- A better understanding of the existing gender relations in the community and the household must be gained by institutions/organizations working for the development of aquaculture.
- Participatory technology development offers more scope to incorporate women's experiences.
- Successful cases of women's involvement in aquaculture can be emphasized.
- Aquaculture training and extension efforts should be improved by taking a more holistic approach that encompasses women's time use, household responsibilities, literacy levels, as well as all aspects of their daily chores.
- Development of indicators to ensure that the involvement of women is monitored on a regular basis so that their activities or participation in aquaculture can be re-focused regularly.
- Even though women are the ones who do the retail marketing of fish in many of the Southeast Asian countries, their information on market is very limited. A mechanism is necessary to expose women to more extensive market information and to link them to a wider market network.

Empowerment of Women Through Self Help Groups (Shg's)

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have become significant institutions for rural development even in India.

The SHGs are mainly meant to promote rural development by helping women living in villages achieve economic empowerment. SHGs are a small, economically homogenous affinity groups of rural/urban poor, voluntarily formed to save and contribute to a common fund to be lent to its members as per group decision and for working together for social and economic uplift of their families and their communities. They encourage women to develop the 'saving' habit. In recent times, self-help groups are emerging as an alternative mechanism to meet the urgent needs through later adjustment of their own saving in a regulated manner.

Fisherwomen are victims of socio-economic factors. Poverty is the main obstacle for the improvement of the fisherwomen. In line with other parts of the country, SHGs have also been formed among fisherwomen in different coastal states in a varying measure. Rapid progress in SHG formation has now turned into an empowerment movement among fisherwomen across various states in India. Economic empowerment results in women's ability to influence or make decision, increased self confidence, better status and role in household etc. The formation of SHGs is not ultimately a micro credit project but an empowerment process. The empowerment of women through SHGs would give benefit not only to the individual women but also for the family and community as a whole through collective action for development.

Participation of women in the development process through Self-help groups approach brings about desired changes in the quality of individual life and also social cohesion in the society.

Policies and Strategies

The will to improve the socio-economic status of women in our country and their representation in all spheres of activity has been clearly reflected in the several programmes for fisherwomen as target groups. The regional and national fisheries development policy makers must also consider women as key participants in coastal aquaculture and in developing strategies for the implementation of specific programmes. Consideration may be given to the following issues:

1. Formal and non-formal education to fisherwomen
2. Awareness for social and economic upliftment
3. Training programmes for improvement of skills and enterprise development
4. Leasing of water bodies to women for independent work process.

5. Establishment of demonstration farms/backyard hatcheries by women
6. Creation of extension units to be run by women

Conclusion

Fisheries are a key sector of Indian economy witnessing progressive and drastic changes over the years, both in production and marketing. The goal for women in fisheries is to make them self-reliant and productive for improving their own and family's living standard. Increasing entrepreneurial activities in post-harvest segment of fisheries for women may provide more and more employment opportunities. Fisherwomen should be provided adequate knowledge and training on awareness of natural disasters and its management. Computer based training module should be designed for employment opportunities. If India's fisheries sector is to be satisfactorily sustained then fisherwomen empowerment, both socially and economically is essential. Hence skills and use of appropriate technologies will enable them to be empowered socially and economically. This can only be done through education about nutrition, health, sanitation, and child care, and training on current technologies and best practices techniques along with financial assistance.

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