
Beyond the Shore: The Unsung Heroines of Marine Fisheries

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ABSTRACT

Marine fisheries play a crucial role in the sustenance and livelihood of coastal communities worldwide. Women, who make up a significant portion of the workforce, are deeply involved in various activities across the fisheries value chain, from pre-harvest to marketing. However, their contributions often go unrecognized, and they face numerous challenges, including social, economic, and environmental constraints. This article explores the essential roles of fisherwomen in marine fisheries, the myriad challenges they encounter, and their transformative impact on the industry.

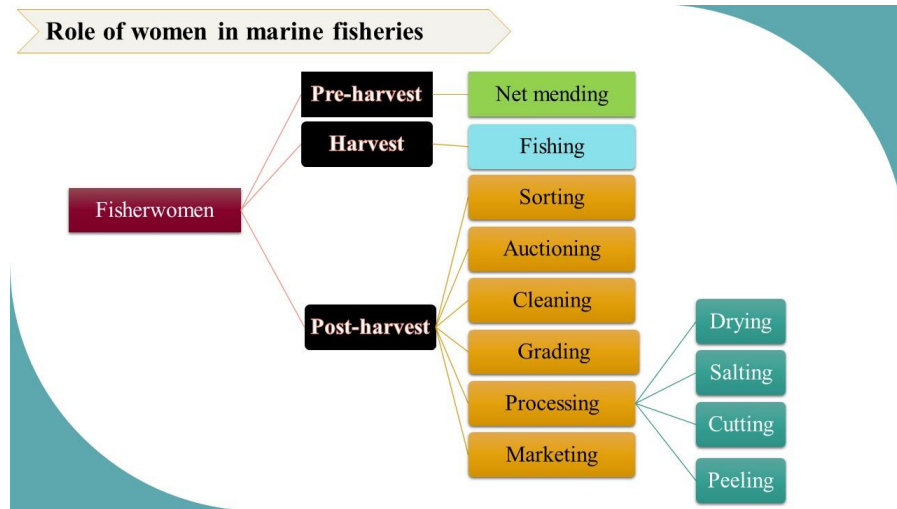
INTRODUCTION

Marine fisheries have long been a vital component of coastal communities, providing sustenance, employment and cultural heritage to the millions of families living along the coastal line. India possesses approximately 8118 km of coastline, together with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spanning almost 2 million square km. Globally 47 per cent of the fisherwomen involved in fisheries workforce (World bank, 2012). Active marine fishing was undertaken by men after harvesting women will take care of the harvest. Although small per cent of the women involving do take in near shore fishing, seaweed harvesting and the collection of clams, mussels and bivalves. They play a major role in post-harvest activities like sorting, grading, cleaning,

salting, drying and marketing activities. Involvement of women in these activities provide additional income to their families. Yet their role is unrecognised this article explores the significant contributions of fisherwomen to marine fisheries, the challenges they face, and the transformative impact they are having on the industry.



Role of fisherwomen in marine fisheries



Pre-harvest:

Pre-harvest activities encompass the tasks carried out before to the capture or collection of fish and other seafood. Women involvement is less in these activities.

Net mending:

It involves the construction of certain components of nets, particularly the cod ends of trawl nets. This activity is conducted during the period of low demand and fish ban period as an additional source of revenue. The boat owners supply the necessary twine for the manufacturing process.

Harvesting:

Fishing:

Fishing is predominantly associated with men. In most regions, the large boats used to fish offshore and deep-sea waters have male crews, whereas women oversee smaller boats and canoes in coastal or inland waters. Their responsibilities include gathering bivalves, molluscs, and pearls, collecting seaweed, and deploying nets or traps. Women in several West Bengal areas engage in shrimp fishing using handheld nets in rivers and estuaries.

Post-harvest:

Auctioning:

During this process, fisherwomen played a crucial role in the market by facilitating the distribution of fish from the fishermen to the subsequent intermediaries or consumers. The auctioneers serve as the initial mediators in the fish marketing channels within the fish market. Auctioneers are intermediaries who enable the purchasing and selling of products, while they do not own the products themselves. The fish caught by the boat owner are transported to auctioneers. In addition, the auctioneer facilitates the selling of the catch to wholesalers and retailers.

Sorting:

Sorting often entails the segregation of a heterogeneous assemblage of fish based on many criteria such as species, maturity level, health status, and cleanliness.

Grading:

Majority of fish are marketed based on their size or quality. Each fish develops at a unique pace, leading to a diverse range of sizes when they are ready for harvest. Grading can eliminate fish that do not fall inside the specified size range.

Salting:

It is a preservation method that involves using salt to extend the amount of time fish may be stored without spoiling. Salt acts as a preservative by absorbing moisture from the fish and significantly reducing deterioration.

Drying:

Drying is a process that occurs frequently in regions with ample sunlight. It aids in the long-term preservation of the fish. Women play a crucial role in the process of drying fish. Immediately after catching fish from the coast, they actively engage in the drying activity. The traditional method of sun drying is the most commonly employed technique for drying fish in India.

Peeling refers to the act of removing the outer layer of the fish.

Processing:

Fisherwomen play a significant role in processing activities. Most of the fisherwomen around the world working in processing companies, they also process the waste fish and prepare fish meal by using sun drying processing methods. They also work in processing industries for grading, packing and freezing seafood products for export. While fresh fish marketing and traditional fish processing remain the preferred activities of fisherwomen in the southern states.

Marketing

Fresh fish retailers (Fixed selling point retailers):

Fixed selling point women retailers refer to women who engage in the retail sale of fresh fish at specific locations. These locations are hired on a daily basis from an agent who has obtained an annual lease from the local self-government organization for the market.

Dry fish retailers:

Dry fish dealers refer to female vendors that specialize in selling dehydrated fish. Additionally, they secure their positions by remunerating the individual who has obtained the market through a lease agreement with the local governing body.

Head loaders (Mobile women retailers):

Head loaders, also known as mobile women retailers, are female vendors that sell fresh fish either door-to-door or from a permanent position in a village or ward for a limited number of hours each day. They purchase fish in baskets from the wholesale market or from other vendors who purchase fish in large quantities. They transport fish by carrying them on their heads to their respective wards or villages for marketing.

Fisherwomen in marine fisheries face a variety of constraints that impact their livelihoods and well-being. These challenges are often rooted in social, economic, and environmental factors.

Here are some of the key constraints:

1. Economic Challenges

- **Limited Access to Finance:** Fisherwomen typically have less access to credit and financial services, which restricts their ability to invest in equipment, technology, or business expansion.
- **Low Income and Poverty:** Due to their limited roles and the undervaluation of their work, fisherwomen often earn less than their male counterparts, leading to persistent poverty.
- **Market Access:** Women in fisheries often have limited access to lucrative markets, and they may face challenges in negotiating fair prices for their products.

2. Legal and Institutional Barriers

- **Inadequate Policy Support:** Fisheries policies and programs are often gender-blind, failing to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in the sector.
- **Limited Participation in Governance:** Women are often excluded from decision-making bodies and governance structures in the fisheries sector, which affects their ability to influence policies that impact their livelihoods.

3. Educational and Training Constraints

- **Lack of Training Opportunities:** Fisherwomen often have limited access to training programs, which restricts their ability to adopt new technologies, improve productivity, or diversify their income sources.
- **Low Literacy Rates:** In some regions, low literacy rates among fisherwomen further limit their access to information, resources, and opportunities for skill development.

4. Access to Technology and Infrastructure

- **Limited Access to Technology:** Fisherwomen may have limited access to modern fishing equipment, storage facilities, and transportation, which affects their productivity and profitability.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure, such as lack of cold storage, inadequate transportation, and poor market facilities, disproportionately impacts fisherwomen, who are often responsible for post-harvest processing and marketing.

CONCLUSION

Fisherwomen are the backbone of many coastal economies, yet they continue to operate under significant constraints that hinder their full potential. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from policymakers, communities, and development organizations to ensure that the contributions of fisherwomen are recognized and supported. By improving access to resources, training, and markets, and by promoting gender equity within the sector, we can empower fisherwomen to enhance their livelihoods and contribute even more significantly to the sustainability and growth of marine fisheries.

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