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Women In Fisheries: Roles, Constraints and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Women are an integral part of fisheries sector in India. About half of the fisherfolk in India are women. They play major roles in pre harvest activities, processing and aquaculture. The issues faced by women in the sector are lack of documentation of women's contribution in the sector, limited access to resources, low digital literacy, slow growth of women's collectives, etc. The present paper discusses in detail the contribution of women in the subsectors of fisheries sector and the constraints faced by them. The possible solutions to the constraints are also discussed.

Key words: Fisheries, women, roles, constraints, solutions

INTRODUCTION

Fisheries sector is known as the sunrise sector of Indian economy because of the impressive growth rate demonstrated by the sector. Around 28 million people, either directly or indirectly, are involved in the activities of the sector (Including both marine and inland sectors) of which 44% are women (DoF, 2022). Out of the 4.9 million marine fisherfolk, 47% are women. Among the 23 million inland fisherfolk, 44% are women. Highest population of coastal fisherwomen is in Tamil Nadu followed by Kerala and Odisha. In Inland Sector, Bihar has the highest number of fisherwomen (28%) followed by Uttar Pradesh (17.8%) and West Bengal (11.92%).

Kerala has the highest number of fisherwomen population (67% of the total full time fisherwomen) who have taken up marine fisheries as their full time occupation followed by Maharashtra and Karnataka. Part time involvement of women in marine fisheries is highest in Tamil Nadu followed by Maharashtra and Karnataka. In Inland sector, the fisherwomen of Telangana ranks first in their full time involvement in the sector (22.4%). Kerala and Assam occupies the 2nd and 3rd position. Fisherwomen of Assam (43%) consider inland fisheries as their part time occupation. Although Bihar

and Uttarpradesh tops in the number of inland fisherwomen in the country, most of their activities are unspecified or undocumented.

The exact nature of the work in which women are involved differs with culture, region and also between rural and urban areas. Their area of involvement can be divided into fishing & gleaning, seed collection and preharvest activities, processing and marketing, labour in processing and aquaculture.

Women in fishing and pre harvest activities

Venturing out into the sea or offshore fishing activities have always been considered as a male domain. This is not only because of the vigorous work involved, but also because of gender roles prescribed by the society. There is a dearth of data on women's involvement in fishing. Their involvement in fishing is relegated to 'subsistence', which they do for maintaining or supporting themselves or their family at a minimal level. In states like Kerala, women net prawns from backwaters and are also actively involved in the collection of bivalves from backwaters and their marketing to ornamental dealers and lime collectors. Around 58% of seed fish/shrimp seed collectors are women (Gopal and Ananthan, 2022). Women of Odisha and West Bengal are mainly involved in fish seed and prawn seed collection. As seaweeds are found naturally along the Gulf of Mannar region of Tamil Nadu, women of the fishing community are involved in collecting them and selling to companies. Coracle fishing or fishing using small canoes by women with gear such as gillnets is commonly seen in reservoirs of India. In Wular Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, women carry out fishing of snow trouts and common carps, and harvest water chestnut locally called trapa for their livelihoods (Regu and Ananthan, 2021). The fish is either sold fresh or processed and is in high demand especially during winters. In Loktak Lake in the north-eastern part of India, women use small canoes for fishing using dip nets, scoop nets and traps fabricated using locally available bamboo (Gopal & Ananthan, 2022)

Constraints of women involved in harvesting and pre harvest activities

In pre harvesting activities like net mending, mechanization in net making has resulted in loss of occupation of women. The climate change and reclamation of lakes has also resulted in the loss of occupation of bivalve harvesters. They are also plagued by different health disorders like headache, myalgia and backpain. The seaweed harvesters dive into deeper waters of around 15m depth without any protective gear. They are always facing risk of death from suffocation, stinging by poisonous marine organisms, cut and bruises from stones and corals

Women in fish processing and marketing activities

The major domain of women is in fish processing and marketing. 86% of the total fisherfolk of marine sector involved in marketing are women (CMFRI Marine Fisheries Census, 2016). Women dominate the post harvest activities like curing (drying), peeling of prawn, processing and working as labourers. 90% and 95% of the fisherfolk involved in curing/processing and prawn peeling is women. Majority of the peripatetic vendors who walk from place to place to sell their fish are usually women who purchase fish directly at auctions held at wholesale markets/landing centres. They sell fish door-to-door, travelling on foot, and carrying fish as headloads.

Constraints of women involved in marketing and processing activities

1. Lack of basic facilities at harbours, landing centres and markets: With greater mechanization and motorization of fishing crafts, the location of harbours and fish landing centres have become more centralized. Women vendors thus have to travel long distances to access fish and may have to spend overnight at harbours and landing centres, in order to participate in early morning auctions. Transportation to landing sites/harbours by public transport is difficult for women vendors because of the social stigma associated with it. Lack of basic facilities (toilets, storage, lights, waiting areas, night shelters) is a common phenomenon in all the harbors, landing centres and markets of the country. Because of these reasons they are also often prone to sexual abuse and harassment. Male dominance at auctioning centres also creates a problem for fisherwomen to have access to good quality fish.
2. Poor access to credit coupled with exorbitant interest rates by money lenders: Women have poorer access to credit and capital, and hence cannot compete with large-scale traders, and commission and export agents. Relying on money lenders for credit often makes them fall into the vicious trap of debt because of the exorbitant interest rates.
3. Lack of ice and proper storage facilities: Fish is a highly perishable commodity that needs to be preserved immediately for longer shelf life. The limited supply of ice and the high cost associated with it usually cannot be borne by women vendors. Hence they are forced to make a distress sale at a much lower price at the end of the day resulting in huge economic loss.
4. Problems at marketplaces: In most market places, the absence of legitimate vending zones forces women to vend fish on pavements and other areas and are thus considered as encroachers on public spaces resulting in legal complications.
5. Poor market infrastructure: In most of the fish markets around the country, basic facilities for storing, processing, and selling fish; clean toilets; access to potable running water & ice; and adequate waste disposal measures are usually not available. Such facilities are essential for the hygienic handling of fish, for the health and wellbeing of vendors as well as consumers and for enabling women to engage with dignity in their occupation.

The displacement of women from fish vending often lands them as wage earners in preprocessing and fish processing plants. Mostly migrant women between the age group of 18-25 are preferred as laborers in these units. These women are forced to stay away from their family making it difficult for them to fulfill their domestic roles. They also face inferior working conditions when compared to men. Taking into account the seasonality of the work, job guarantee is not ensured for them. They are also prone to a long array of health hazards and drudgery issues. Occupational diseases often reported from the sector include frostbite, hearing loss because of continued exposure to loud noise, skin infection and sepsis, allergic respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal cumulative trauma disorders, and stress related health problems. The poor ergonomic practices of long hours of standing or awkward floor sitting postures also result in musculoskeletal pain and discomfort, mostly localized in the lower back, followed by knees, upper back, calf, shoulder, and other areas (Nag and Nag, 2007). The workers

often get wounds because of the use of cutting tools with poorly designed handle grips and also due to loss of dexterity of hands caused by exposure to extremely low temperature in the plants.

Women in aquaculture

Women are involved in the various activities of aquaculture, but data on their participation or contribution is lacking. They are involved in various activities like pond preparation, seed stocking, fertilizer application, feed preparation, weed clearance, watch and ward, sorting and grading of harvest etc. But mostly they are excluded or are not participating in skill involving practices like feed formulation, water quality management, disease management etc. This is mainly because of their lack of knowledge and skill. The practice of exclusion of women from technology popularization programmes, extension services etc must have resulted in the present status of women in aquaculture. Cultural or social barriers or the preference for vegetarian diet could have also resulted in the non participation of women in aquaculture in many states of India. For eg in the northern states like Bihar and UP, the participation of women in aquaculture is very meager (or there is a lack of data), although their population is the highest in the country. Dietary habits also will define the participation of women in aquaculture. Although Punjab is one of the top most states in freshwater fish production, the per capita fish consumption of the state is only 0.001kg/ month. The average yearly per capita fish consumption in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura are very high to the tune of 0.92 kg, 0.72 kg and 1.27 kg (DoF, 2022) respectively which can be seen reflected in the participation of women in the aquaculture.

Constraints of women in aquaculture

- Limited access to water resources in the village: Earlier the issue faced by women was lack of access to water resources. But in the present scenario, lot of impetus is given on promoting aquaculture by women/women groups through leasing of village ponds. Hence lack of awareness on Govt Schemes and programmes or lack of motivation to claim the opportunity can be said as one of the present issues.
- Lack of access to technology: For an example, the knowledge of women on scientific aquaculture management practices is low when compared to men. This is mainly because of the exclusion of women in the popularization of the package of practices or their lack of exposure to experiences of successful women entrepreneurs in aquaculture. Popularisation of women friendly technologies like women friendly fishing gears will also help in improving their participation. Flexible timings for training women need to be practiced by extension functionaries so as to improve their participation.
- Lack of access to credit: Reduced adoption of aquaculture technologies can be linked to the lack of access to credit or other resources. Most of the Govt programmes and schemes have designated 30% of its fund allocation for women beneficiaries. Hence the women should be made aware of these programmes and schemes. It is also necessary to handhold women in availing these schemes for credit linked subsidies.
- Lack of/slow growth of women collectives (FPO's, Farmers Clubs etc): Although there is lot of progress in the formation of FPO's or collectives of farmers but the pace of growth of women FPO's in the sector is very slow.

- Lack of entrepreneurial and marketing skills: Sufficient motivation in terms of development of entrepreneurial and marketing skills is needed for women to venture into aquaculture or processing as an entrepreneurial option. They should be exposed to EDP trainings

The common issues faced by women in the fisheries sector are

- Absence of gender disaggregated data on the contribution of women in the sector- This leads to gender blindness in formulation of policies of programmes and policies.
- Limited access to resources (eg water resources, infrastructure, inputs, credit, extension, services, technology, markets, social insurance)
- Low level of literacy especially digital literacy
- Lack /slow growth of women's/women led organisations resulting in less exposure, absence of pay parity

Suggested recommendations to mitigate the constraints are:

- Collection and compilation of gender disaggregated data and information on the roles played by women in fisheries (Aquaculture/pre harvest/post harvest).
- Spreading education among farm women, especially digital education
- Development and popularization of women friendly fisheries technologies (including package of practices)
- Location specific and need based training programmes with flexible timings
- Improving access to credit/subsidies- through awareness creation on Govt programmes, schemes and policies
- Improving access to markets (including e-markets)
- Improving access to good quality fish (eg: participation of women in auctions)
- Improving cold chain facilities
- Improving infrastructural facilities in markets / processing factories
- Ensuring pay parity
- Organizing women into FIG's/FPO's/clubs for aquaculture/processing activities
- Ensuring women leadership in co-operatives, FPO's, clubs etc to enhance their decision making capacity

CONCLUSION

Women in Indian fisheries like in other parts of the world, play crucial economic roles in both the fishery sector as well as in the nutritional security of their families. But women face considerable discrimination with respect to access to technology, extension, knowledge, skill, credit, resources, market, positions of power etc. Bridging the gender gap in fisheries sector requires a concerted efforts from policy makers, researchers, implementing agencies and all the other stake holders.

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