

Women Contribution To The Indian Economy Through Fisheries

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Abstract

The fisheries sector in India is a vital component of the economy, significantly contributing to food security, employment, and livelihood for millions. Among its many contributors, women represent a substantial and influential force in fisheries and aquaculture in addition to their household activities. They are involved in various fisheries-related activities like fish capture and culture; production, processing, marketing and management of fish, and other fishery-associated businesses; and indirectly play a vital role in the fish economy and food security of a country. But their role goes unnoticed. Their roles in the fisheries value chain are often unpaid tasks and are not seen as employment, thus invisible in fisheries management plans and fisheries statistics. Their roles can vary depending on cultural, regional, and economic factors. Understanding and valuing women's contribution to fisheries has enormous effects on development policies, management, and poverty reduction. Despite their critical contributions across pre-harvest, post-harvest, and marketing activities, women often remain marginalized in terms of recognition, decision-making power, and access to essential resources. As India progresses towards its vision of Viksit Bharat (Developed India) by 2047, empowering women in the fisheries sector is not merely a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for fostering inclusive and sustainable growth. This chapter explores the multifaceted role of women in fisheries, and the unique challenges they encounter; outlines practical strategies for empowerment that align with India's broader developmental objectives and hence, their contribution to the economy and food security .

Keywords:

Fisheries, Aquaculture, Statistics, Economy, Employment, etc.

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1. Introduction

India, being a peninsular country, is blessed with a vast coastline of over 8,100 km and has an extensive network of rivers and inland water bodies. It holds immense potential in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. This sector contributes significantly to the national economy, playing a vital role in ensuring food security, and nutritional requirements and providing livelihoods to millions. Among these contributors, women form an indispensable yet often under-recognized workforce. Their involvement spans across various dimensions of the fisheries value chain—from pre-harvest to post-harvest operations—and has substantial implications for economic growth, community development, and gender equity. As India envisions itself as a Viksit Bharat by 2047, women's full participation in sectors like fisheries becomes a non-negotiable component of this transformation. The term 'Viksit Bharat' means a fully developed India that includes economic, social and political sectors. This chapter examines the historical, present, and potential contributions of women in the Indian fisheries sector, offering insights and strategies to maximize their economic and social impact.

2. Significance of the Fisheries Sector in India

The fisheries sector in India has witnessed consistent growth, contributing approximately 1.07% to the national GDP and over 6.85% to the agricultural GDP. It provides livelihood to over 16 million people, of whom a significant portion are women. India is the second-largest producer of fish in the world, with both marine and inland fisheries contributing to this production. Women's role in this sector, although often unrecognized and unaccounted, is fundamental to the sector's sustainability and progress. The sector's potential remains significantly unutilized unless gender disparities are systematically addressed and inclusive policies are implemented.

3. Women's Contributions to Indian Fisheries

Women have played a foundational and enduring role in Indian fisheries. They constitute around 30% of the workforce in the fisheries sector and shape it through their labor, knowledge, and resilience across generations. Their historical contributions span the entire fisheries value chain, though their work has often remained invisible and underappreciated. Women in India have been involved in the fisheries sector in various capacities:

3.1. Pre-Harvest and Harvest Activities

- Women are traditionally engaged in net weaving, mending, bait preparation, and maintaining fishing gear like traps, scoop nets, and hooks for **fishing in inland waters**.
- **These are involved in the harvesting of sedentary aquatic species** like clams, oysters, sea cucumbers, and seaweed in some coastal regions, often in challenging and hazardous environments. Examples include seaweed diving in the Gulf of Mannar and fishing in the Sundarbans.
- **Shrimp seed collection** and capture of juvenile crabs and fish fry in estuarine zones.
- In states like **Kerala**, women divers harvest clams and other mollusks with simple hand-held tools, sometimes diving for extended periods.

3.2. Post-Harvest and Processing

Post-harvest roles provide the **widest employment opportunities** for women workers in fish processing. These include:

- **Sorting and Grading:** Sorting fish by size and quality at landing centers.
- **Processing:** Cleaning, salting, drying, fermenting, smoking, and freezing fish.
- **Packing and Labeling:** Preparing products for local sale or export.
- **Marketing and Retailing:** Selling fish in local markets, roadside stalls, or door-to-door.

- **Transport and Logistics:** Handling small-scale transportation to nearby markets.

According to the **FAO (2012)**, over **60% of seafood is marketed by women** in Asia and Africa. Their entrepreneurial efforts, especially in retail and processing, not only support their families but also contribute significantly to the **rural economy and food security**. Their expertise has been crucial in ensuring product quality for both domestic consumption and export markets, with women making up significant percentages in prawn peeling (over 90%) and other fishery product processing (around 70%).

3.3. Marketing and Trade

Women dominate small-scale fish trading and vending, especially in marine fishing communities, accounting for approximately 75% of those engaged in fish marketing. These are responsible for transporting fish from landing sites to markets, negotiating sales, and ensuring that fish reaches a broad consumer base, thus playing a key role in community food security and household incomes.

3.4. Aquaculture, Inland Fisheries and Allied Sectors

In inland fisheries, especially in states like West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam, women are directly involved in Feeding, maintenance, and health monitoring of fish, fish seed collection, pond management, and feed preparation. Integration of fish farming with agriculture and livestock forms the base for sustainable rural livelihoods. Their contribution to seaweed collection, prawn seed gathering, and salt-pan work, often outnumber men in these sectors (e.g., Tamil Nadu).

The National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) has reported increased participation of women in freshwater aquaculture through self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and microfinance initiatives.

3.5. Community and Family Roles

Women historically manage household finances, provide food security, and support social cohesion within fishing communities. Their contributions to family welfare and community resilience have been substantial, even if largely unrecognized in official statistics.

3.6. Advocacy and Leadership

Women organized themselves to claim rights and recognition, challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for fisherwomen's rights. Examples include leaders like Vedavalli in Puducherry and others who have fought for legal recognition of traditional occupations in protected areas.

4. Economic Contribution of Women in Fisheries

Women's economic roles in fisheries manifest in multiple forms:

4.1. Post-Harvest Processing and Marketing

Post-harvest processing is predominantly managed by women in India. They are involved in:

- Cleaning, gutting, and salting of fish.
- Sun-drying and smoking fish in rural areas.
- Fermentation processes for fish-based products.
- Retail and wholesale fish markets, particularly in urban areas like Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi.

Their labor adds considerable value to fish products and ensures steady income flows in fishing communities. Despite their contributions, women's work often goes unpaid or underpaid, with limited access to market linkages or price controls.

4.2. Employment and Livelihood Security

The employment of women in fisheries provides crucial livelihood security, especially in economically and socially disadvantaged regions. Their earnings often support household expenditures, children's education, and health care. In many cases, women-headed households rely solely on fisheries

for income generation. Women-led micro-businesses in the sector boost rural entrepreneurship and employment.

4.3. Export Contribution

India's seafood exports (worth over \$8 billion annually) depend heavily on women in processing plants.

5. Challenges Faced by Women in Fisheries

Despite their significant involvement and contributions, women in fisheries face numerous obstacles that hinder their progress and limit their potential. The challenges faced by women in the fisheries sector are:

5.1. Lack of Access to Resources

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of ownership rights over essential resources such as land, ponds, or fishing vessels. This restricts their ability to make independent decisions or access institutional credit and subsidies designed to support fisheries.

5.2. Limited Access to Technology and Training

Most training programs and technological interventions in fisheries are primarily designed for men. Women are often left behind due to a lack of awareness, mobility issues, or prevailing gender stereotypes.

5.3. Financial Exclusion

Women often face limited access to formal credit and insurance schemes, which are crucial for starting or expanding fisheries-related businesses. Microfinance institutions exist but often charge higher interest rates.

5.4. Social and Cultural Norms

Patriarchal attitudes restrict women's participation in decision-making bodies like fisheries cooperatives or Panchayati Raj institutions. Traditional gender roles restrict women's mobility and decision-making power in fishing communities. Cultural taboos also prevent their involvement in certain aspects of marine fishing or restrict them to near-shore activities.

5.5. Occupational Hazards

Women working in fish drying or processing units are exposed to health hazards such as respiratory issues, back pain, and skin diseases, with minimal occupational safety measures. The working conditions in fish processing and retail are often unhygienic and labor-intensive. Women face long hours, exposure to harsh chemicals, and lack of protective gear, leading to health issues.

5.6. Gender Inequity and Invisibility

Women's contributions are frequently undervalued or excluded from official statistics. They are often considered "helpers" rather than workers, which leads to denial of recognition, wages, and social security.

6. Government Schemes and Initiatives

Several government schemes aim to empower women in fisheries, though more can be done in implementation. Some of the schemes are discussed as below:

6.1. Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)

Launched in 2020, PMMSY aims to increase fish production and improve infrastructure while promoting inclusivity. It includes provisions for:

- Supporting women-led Self Help Groups (SHGs)
- Skill development training

- Financial assistance for entrepreneurship

6.2. National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB)

NFDB offers technical and financial support for women involved in fish drying, processing, and marketing, with a special focus on marginalized communities.

6.3. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK)

This scheme provides micro-credit to women in the unorganized sector, including those in fisheries, to start or expand businesses.

6.4. State-Level Initiatives

Kerala's **Matsyafed** actively promotes women's cooperatives in fish marketing and processing. State governments provide motorized vehicles and cold storage units to women vendors in Tamil Nadu to improve efficiency and income.

6.5. NGO and SHG Initiatives

Many NGOs like **MS Swaminathan Research Foundation** and **SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)** have empowered fisherwomen through capacity building, microcredit, and skill development.

6.6. International Support

The **FAO**, **World Bank**, and **UN Women** have initiated studies and pilot projects to strengthen women's roles in the fisheries sector, focusing on data collection, gender audits, and best practices.

7. Case Studies of Successful Women in Fisheries

7.1. Kerala's Women Fish Vendors

In Kerala, women's cooperatives like **Matsyafed** have transformed livelihoods. Women now operate cold storage units, processing centers, and retail outlets, significantly increasing income and bargaining power.

7.2. SHGs in Andhra Pradesh

Women SHGs in Andhra Pradesh have taken up aqua farming collectively. Large number of women vendors sell fish daily, traveling long distances, often using public transport with heavy loads. With government support, they now own ponds and manage operations from seed to sale.

7.3. Marine Women in Tamil Nadu

In Ramanathapuram, women have been trained in seaweed farming and are now exporting value-added products, bringing in significant foreign exchange.

7.4. Women's Aquaculture Cooperatives in Odisha

In Odisha, women-led cooperatives are managing fish ponds under government lease. With support from the Fisheries Department, they have achieved higher yields and better incomes, leading to improved community status.

7.5. Women in Shrimp Processing Units, Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh's shrimp export industry employs a large number of women in processing plants. Though their wages are relatively low, efforts by labor unions and state authorities are underway to improve working conditions and social security benefits.

8. Women's Empowerment as a Pillar of Viksit Bharat

8.1. Economic Empowerment

Promoting women's access to income-generating opportunities in fisheries directly contributes to poverty alleviation and boosts household welfare.

8.2. Social Empowerment

Economic independence leads to greater self-confidence, participation in community affairs, and resistance to gender-based violence.

8.3. Political Empowerment

Empowered women demand representation in cooperatives, local governance, and decision-making bodies, ensuring their voices are heard in shaping fisheries policies.

9. Strategies for Empowering Women in Fisheries

To effectively empower women in the fisheries sector and unlock their full potential, the following strategies are essential:

9.1. Education and Capacity Building

- Integrate gender-sensitive training in fisheries extension services.
- Offer vocational training in digital literacy, financial literacy, and enterprise management.

9.2. Access to Credit and Insurance

- Design gender-specific credit schemes with low-interest loans.
- Encourage banks to treat women SHGs as credible borrowers.
- Include women in fisheries insurance programs.

9.3. Technology and Innovation

- Introduce low-cost, user-friendly tools for fish processing.
- Promote solar drying, hygienic packaging, and cold chain technologies.

9.4. Institutional Support

- Ensure 33% reservation for women in fisheries cooperatives.
- Promote women's leadership in local governance structures.

9.5. Market Linkages

- Develop women-only markets or fish stalls with hygienic infrastructure.
- Use digital platforms for direct sales and branding of products.

9.6. Policy Interventions

- Include gender-disaggregated data in fisheries surveys.
- Develop a National Policy on Gender in Fisheries.

10. Role of NGOs and Private Sector

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can bridge the gap between policy and practice by organizing capacity-building workshops, facilitating SHG formation and scaling, and linking women producers to national and international markets. Such alignment strengthens India's international commitment and enhances its global image as a progressive, inclusive economy.

Private companies can adopt Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to fund women's fisheries enterprises, improve infrastructure, and promote environmental sustainability.

11. The Way Forward

To maximize the economic potential of women in fisheries, the following steps are essential:

11.1. Gender-Sensitive Policies

Policies must recognize women's roles as workers and entrepreneurs in fisheries. Gender budgeting and inclusion should be integral parts of all fisheries-related initiatives.

11.2. Promote Women's Leadership

Establish mentorship programs and leadership training to encourage women's involvement in decision-making roles within fisheries cooperatives and local governance structures.

11.3. Enhance Data Collection

Implement sex-disaggregated data collection in fisheries surveys and research to inform policy development and track progress.

11.4. Ensure Social Security

Expand social security nets to include women in fisheries, providing access to healthcare, insurance, and pension schemes.

11.5. Strengthen Market Access

Develop women-only markets or designated fish stalls with hygienic infrastructure and essential amenities. Facilitate access to digital platforms for direct sales and branding of products.

11.6. Foster Collaboration

Encourage partnerships between government, NGOs, the private sector, and local communities to implement holistic empowerment initiatives.

11.7. Promote Research

Invest in studies to understand the specific challenges and opportunities for women in different regions and fisheries sectors.

12. Conclusion

As India marches towards the ambitious goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047, inclusive growth is non-negotiable. Women in fisheries represent a vital yet underutilized force capable of transforming the sector. Empowerment is not just about inclusion; it is about creating resilient, equitable systems where every individual, regardless of gender, can contribute to national development. Recognizing women's roles, addressing their challenges, and providing them with the tools to succeed can significantly enhance productivity, economic resilience, and community well-being. Policymakers, institutions, and society must act together to ensure that women's empowerment in fisheries becomes a cornerstone of a truly developed India.

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