



## EMPOWERMENT OF FISHERWOMEN IN FISH PROCESSING AND VENDING SECTORS - AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

**F**ishermen live by the sea, and many a people lead their life around them. Not many people are aware of the really staggering number of people building their liver around fishermen. These related activities include net making, auctioning off the catch, vending the catch and processing the fish where the women play a major role than the men. There has been a paradigm shift in the falsehood that women are ignorant and less skilled and therefore can only perform household chores. Women first entered the field through retail selling of fish and indigenous food processing and then widened their field of play with the emergence of modern fish processing units. With the expert potential, the employment opportunities for women increased even more. However Gender discrimination still prevails in the work place and even at home. Man's own misconception of his superiority as well as the inferiority complex that many a women suffer from makes 'equal rights for the women' a far-away dream. This is appositely echoed in the commonly used expression of 'weaker sex' while denoting women. Challenges faced in work places includes sexual as well as mental exploitation, long working hours, tedious efforts of vending and processing etc. Even if they manage to surpass these obstacles and hurdles of stressful long working hours, the fact that they get cheated out of their earning still looms large. In this back drop, this paper tries to analyses the various challenges faced by the fisherwomen.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender discrimination, vending sector and fish processing.

### INTRODUCTION

Fishing sector is a sunrise sector of our economy. Its role in increasing food supply, generating job opportunities, raising nutritional level and earning foreign exchange has been important. Tamil Nadu is an important maritime state in India, which contributed nearly 20 per cent of the country's marine fish landings and 24 per cent of the state's export. It has a coastline of 720 km, which forms 10 per cent of the country's coastline. The marine

fish production in Tamil Nadu during the year 2012 was estimated at 5.17 lakh tones, of which the mechanized units contributed 59 per cent (CMFRI, 2013). It is of vital importance to the state's economy as it generates employment, income, foreign exchange earnings and also contributes to the protein intake of people. Tamil Nadu is the fifth largest state in India in terms of fish production after West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Kerala.



It is a sad fact that in Tamil Nadu through the fishing sector contributes immensely to the increase in the national income of the country it is not yet reflected in the living conditions of the fishing community, and the plight of the women is especially upsetting. Fisher women mainly engage in household managed fishery enterprises which contribute significantly to the coastal economy as well as to their disposable household income. But, yet their role in the decision making process within their house as well as the society remains limited. Only social organizations, awareness, training, micro enterprise development, access to institutional credit can enhance their social and economic role. The role of women in the economic activities of coastal fishing communities supplements region's livelihood. The role of women in fishing is very significant and they mainly take up the role of facilitators in fish distribution particularly in a marine state like Tamil Nadu. The most important role of fisherwomen in both artisanal and industrial fisheries is at the processing and marketing stages.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The major objectives of the study are,

- 1) To examine the importance of fish processing sector.
- 2) To analyse the role of women in fish processing.
- 3) To identify the problems faced by the fisherwomen.

This paper is based on the secondary source of data, books and journals, government publications, websites etc.

### **FISH PROCESSING SECTOR**

Processing sector is an important part of the fisheries sector. It mainly uses labour intensive activity with a large export potential and provides employment to a large number of people with the majority of them being women. The export of processed seafood products has shown a continuous upward shift in Tamil Nadu which resulted in the emergence of many sea-food processing plants in the recent past. Many of the women are engaged in small scale fish processing units, where they process the fish, sell it locally and make earnings out of it. The fish processing sector has opened up a wide range of job security and self-security women have is dubious, their lack of awareness about their own rights is a matter of concern as is evident from the fact that women fall prey of money lenders and auctioneers. Exploitation occurs in many a different ways and sex happens to be a modulated from of exploitation in many places.

### **WOMEN IN FISH PROCESSING**

Women in Tamil Nadu also function in the capacity of processors and sorters in landing centers in

the organized and unorganized sectors on wage basis where they specialize in the peeling of prawn or shrimp. Due to the advent of highly developed peeling centers the demand for such workers has fallen. Most of the processing work is done by women either in cottage levels or as daily wage labourers in the large scale processing industries. They are also engaged in the processing of the catch, such as drying, salting, smoking and in the preparation of fish derived foods like fish paste and cakes etc. The fish peeling shed is connected with the processing industry and is entirely depended on its survival. As an integral part of the export industry it employs fairly large number of women as peelers, who are from economically backward sections and income from peeling sheds happen to be an important addition towards their sustenance.

The wages in peeling sheds are very low and are paid 'piece rate'. This system is really exploitive as the workers are compelled to put in extra effort to earn maximum possible income. Women in the fish processing plants are often harassed, sexually exploited and undervalued for their work. Wages are also cut for broken prawn in most of the peeling sheds and therefore they have to handle it with extra care. They are also exploited by supplying slightly more than the prescribed quantity of prawn for peeling without raising wages and those who protest are sent away. Even though women are as efficient as men, earnings are not always the same. Different payments to males and females are prevalent. In busy season work is generally between 5 am to 5 pm and such long hours in the ice-cold surroundings can bring health related issues like headache, back pain, skin problems etc, there are also identified issues like women forced to work overtime for which payment is not made. Sometimes payments are delayed bringing more difficulty for the women to manage their exigencies at home.

### **WOMEN AS VENDORS IN FISH PROCESSING**

A particular aspect related to fish vending in Tamil Nadu is that women constitute the majority vendors when compared to men. They are also among the most exploited. The women fish vendors collect the fish from big contractors as early as 3 in the morning. Fish vending by women involves hours of hard labour, with head loads being carried long distances. This routine work in the early morning disturbs their sleep and they end up having serious health issues. In addition to their domestic responsibilities it was an additional burden for them, they were often treated as second class citizens in market place pushing them away to the corners and not allowing them to sell fish in a decent clean place. Invariably, she undertakes

the job of fish marketing in addition to the household responsibilities of cooking, raising children and attending to the needs of an often abusive and wasteful husband. As fish is a highly perishable commodity the unsold fish that is carried back home is to be cleaned, salted and dried. They are facing additional burden in terms of increased distance travelled the time spent for their trade and indebtedness. Fisherwomen are generally engaged in marketing but their social status remains poor. Lack of transportation was a major obstruction that the women vendors faced during the 80's. They were not allowed to travel in the public transport with their fish baskets and sometimes they had to wait hours to catch a vehicle to reach the destined market.

Ensuring the long struggles, the government succumbed to the demands of the protestors to provide transportation facilities at least and the responsibility for it was entrusted with the Matsysfed. However the government failed to allot funds for it thus creating agitations yet again. These buses, not being insured also made compensation claims difficult in case of may mishap. The physical and infrastructural facilities in the fish markets are really pathetic. Blatent gender discrimination is a common factor women are allocated the dirtiest and unnoticed corners of the markets; they are denied basic infrastructural facilities such as toilets, room for changing the dress, water pipes, pure drinking water, ice boxes or freezers and a table to keep the fish for sale. Often they are being harassed and even physically tortured by the goondas appointed by the contractors to collect the rent from the sellers. Women have also been facing some health problems. As they spend long hours out in the open sun, selling fish or drying and processing it, higher temperatures combined with high humidity cause grater dehydration.

## THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

Fishing is often seen as a male dominated activity as it involves boats, equipment's and long hours of exertion at sea. The women's role is limited to that of a second grade worker or a helping hand for maintaining equipment, processing and marketing of fish. But their role is often less acknowledged socially or economically as they are confined to less visible roles or at times considered to be an activity that is included in the chores. They are often labeled as imperceptible workers. The contractsystem and lack of job security adds to their problem, they are paid a low wage rate. In spite of these issues, they are forced to stick on to their job as they lack training to enter into any other supplementary jobs. They often fall prey to middleman charging high interest rates

and thus finding it quite impossible to get out of the vicious circle of poverty.

## CONCLUSION

Evidently the women in fishing activity are not part of the new 'Shining India' that the country's planners, economists, government officials and politicians boast of. There is a need to improve their livelihood, create buffers and protect them from exploitation. Fisher folk happen to be one of the most neglected strata's of the society and fisher women even far below. There are no proper organizations or labour laws to provide protection from exploitation or harassment, mainly because it is an unorganised sector. An improvement in the economy of the fish folk through increased credit facility and mechanization alone cannot be taken as a symbol of development. The empowerment of women fishers should also be assured. The various social, psychological, institutional and economic issues challenging empowerment of fisher women have to be seriously taken into consideration while chalking out new development strategies. Through attempts have been made by government through various agencies and departments for the social and economic development of women by incorporating their participation has not yet been successful. More efforts have to be put in to fill the gap while planning and implementing programmes for women. Researchers should focus enough so as to generate more women as friendly technologies ensuring better as safe jobs with right payment for their hard work.

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