

Do women fish?

Case studies from India highlight the vital but little-recognised role that women play as fishers

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It is now acknowledged that women account for 50 per cent of the workforce in fisheries and aquaculture, especially when we take into account their work in post-harvest activities like processing and trading. The findings of the 'Illuminating Hidden Harvests' report show that, globally, about one in four workers in small-scale fisheries are women. However, women, especially in developing countries, face substantive challenges to engaging in and benefitting equitably from these sectors. Several studies have pointed out that they have poor access to and control of resources. Also, in India, women are losing out on the traditional access rights they had on landed fish due to factors like mechanisation of fishing vessels. Further, deep-seated patriarchal, cultural and social norms limit their engagement. Most of women's work

is in the form of unpaid family labour, which is seen as an extension of household reproductive roles. Incomes they earn for similar work are lower as compared to men, for example, in seafood processing or in fish vending. In dry fish processing and trade, a transition from processors/traders, to low paid and sometimes unpaid labour, is being observed. The one node in fish value chains that engages women and yet is hardly acknowledged, however, is fish harvesting. In India, about 49 per cent of the 2.5 million adult population in marine fishing communities in India, are women. Of the adult population in these communities, 81 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are reported to be employed in the sector. There are no reports of women in fish harvesting, although 58 per cent of all seed collectors are women

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Women gillnet fishers, Raigad, Maharashtra, India. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also do fishing

and a massive 74 per cent of all allied workers too, which includes work like net making and mending, marketing, curing and processing, peeling, labour, other jobs.

If we were to formally record all the jobs that women carry out in fisheries their profiles would be highly varied. Women mend and make nets, they collect seed, they sort fish when landed, they auction fish and they engage in vending both in markets and door-to-door. They also dry excess catch or the catch that is specifically meant for drying, they smoke and ferment fish, collect seaweed and work in small-scale pre-processing and commercial processing. They also do fishing. These myriad activities are however, not captured comprehensively.

Besides all this, women bear almost all the burden of household work. A 2019 survey in India found that women (including fisherwomen) spent on average five hours and fifteen minutes in a day doing domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing. And one third of the women, mostly those with young children, spend on average another two hours and seventeen minutes every day caring for and instructing children: seven and a half hours in all. And interestingly, for women who have received higher education, the burden of such work is not significantly different than for other women.

There are no data or official records of women doing fishing. Their fishing activities are often termed 'subsistence', which, by definition, is something that is done for maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimal level. Our studies over the past few years, however, show that women do not always only carry out subsistence fishing. Their activities ensure nutritional security as well as additional incomes, and the women themselves consider fishing as their distinct livelihood activity.

In our studies we have documented several cases where women are engaged in reservoir based fish harvest. Reservoirs are large inland water resources that can help increase fish production. Since the main function of reservoirs is usually power generation or irrigation, reservoir based fishing is generally considered a spin-off, secondary activity. Reservoirs are stocked with fish by the Department of Fisheries of the respective states, and fishing rights are leased either to individuals or cooperative societies. Coracle fishing or fishing using small canoes with gear such as gillnets is commonly seen. Generally, fishing is carried out by husband-wife teams and up to 80 per cent of household income comes from this activity. Since equal effort is expended, half of this income is the direct contribution of the women.

Lakes and rivers are important inland water bodies too. 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. 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. The fish is marketed locally.

As in the case of lakes and rivers, fishing in India's coastal backwaters and estuaries has also been documented. In the southern state of Kerala, husband-wife teams carry out fishing using gillnets in the Vembanad backwaters. The marketing is undertaken by the husband, but the wife is an equal partner in all other tasks.

In Raigad, Maharashtra, women along with men engage in single-day gillnet fishing in estuaries, fishing at depths of between three to five fathoms (about 5.5 to 9 metres) and harvest ribbon fish, shrimps, mullets, croakers, and golden anchovy. Women are solely responsible for marketing either in their villages or in faraway markets, depending on the volume of catches.

Bheels are unique to the north-eastern part of the country. These are flood plain wetlands, low-lying areas bordering large rivers, which are seasonally inundated by the overspill from the main river. Women in large numbers engage in fishing using unique dip nets, sometimes reaching the shallow fishing grounds in canoes. These bheels are dominated by nutrient-rich small fishes, ensuring the nutritional security of the households of these women. These fish are an important constituent of the diet of the people in the region and are rich in nutrients.

The pokkali fields are part of the wetland ecosystem typical in Kerala. These are lands where the alternate 'rice-fish system' has been traditionally practised. The fish/shrimp culture that takes place alternately with rice production utilises a natural filtration process. Of late farmers have also been stocking these farms. These lands are open to whoever wishes to fish on it once one crop is harvested and before the second is taken up. Generally women (and very few men) glean or fish and shrimp from these fields. They use small indigenous scoop nets for harvesting, following the lunar cycle to decide on when to fish (fishing close to the full moon and new moon days). Daily fishing can extend up to six hours, in neck deep water. Feeder canals to these lands are also potential sources of fish, where the women carry out the activity when the lands, during the cropping season, are declared out of bounds. The fish is used for household consumption, with the excess being marketed fresh.

Women working in groups also use indigenous gear like coconut leaves for fishing in these areas, collecting the fish by dragging the fronds in the water and handpicking the fish. Again in the northeastern parts of the country,

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we see dip nets being used on the margins of paddy fields for fishing. Women in groups also travel to a neighbouring district and fish in paddy fields, ditches and other waterlogged areas. They go out in groups, fish for about five hours, and then proceed to the market to sell the catch. Groups comprising young and older women from local fisher communities in Raigad, Maharashtra, glean oysters, gastropods and crabs from inshore waters and creeks, using curved blades on a wooden handle. Women from Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu in South India, for decades have dived into the waters to harvest seaweed. Seaweed farming is in fact extensively carried out by women.

These are just some examples from among several thousands of women, engaged in fishing in India but who are not licenced fishers. Women

are engaged in various activities in small-scale fish value chains; in the first place, their work needs to be recognised as fish work. Women's work makes significant contributions to household incomes and nutritional security. Women are also a major workforce in fish harvesting across the country. Prevailing estimates of 33 per cent of women being part of the workforce therefore need realistic revision. The impact of different stressors is different on men and women; this needs to be recognised too. Gender should be central to policy development and all women in the sector should be recognised as fishworkers. A comprehensive census to generate on-the-ground factual information on women and their contributions must be taken up. ❏