

On the Shores of Tomorrow

Women in coastal fishing communities are reshaping possibilities while navigating social realities

By **Tamara Gan Kristensen**
(tamaragkristensen@gmail.com), Independent
Researcher, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

The vital, but often invisible, role of women in the context of small-scale fisheries (SSF) is becoming more recognised, especially as fishers operating within the SSF sector experience various socioeconomic and gender-based challenges in light of industry changes. As recent initiatives promoting the 'Blue Revolution' in India have modernised the fishing sector, the livelihoods of traditional coastal fishing communities have experienced drastic change, ultimately causing many young fishers to seek different avenues of employment and livelihood opportunities.

However, these opportunities are profoundly gendered. Fisherwomen in the Indian context are often undervalued, with their labour being largely unpaid due to the lack of formal representation in organizations or government policies. In addition, social and cultural structures strongly influenced by patriarchal norms – such as women having limited participation in boat fishing or access to travel – remain embedded in the social fabric of fishing communities. Previous research has shown that it is primarily older women, in female-headed households, who have the freedom to travel to different markets and access a wider network of other women that have been able to diversify their work within the fishing sector.

In a fishing hamlet in Tamil Nadu's coastal Cuddalore District, many young women are working with, and pushing against, these boundaries they experience. In challenging the limits imposed upon them, they seek to pursue their aspirations of a better future – not only for themselves, but for generations of girls and women to come.

The fishing hamlet and its inhabitants have unfortunately experienced the brunt of the modernisation of the fishing industry; declining fish stocks along the village coast have prompted fishermen to migrate to bigger fishing harbours, and the women of the village have lost access to the post-harvest work that would have followed coastal fishing.

Traditionally, the women would participate in post-harvest activities such as cutting, drying and selling fish. This is no longer the reality for many young women in the village.

As one young woman noted, "Nowadays, the fish catch is so small that few to no women are participating."

While the loss of fish stock has affected the entire village financially, young fishermen have largely remained in fishing occupations by being able to migrate to fishing harbours such as Cuddalore or Chennai. However, young women do not experience similar opportunities of mobility. In addition to the gender-based divisions of labour within the fishing industry that prevent young women from going out to sea, their husbands or families tend to be authoritative figures in a young woman's pathway to pursuing other opportunities. "The husband and the in-laws are the pillars of the house in a woman's life" is a common refrain that illustrates this reality.

Moreover, physical barriers such as access to transportation make it all the more difficult to find employment beyond village borders. As one woman lamented, "There are no bus facilities in this village." Another young woman shared that while she managed to get a job in the city, the opportunity ultimately proved to be fleeting as she "couldn't get there on time [since] this village doesn't have any good bus or auto facilities."

While a Tamil Nadu government scheme called the 'Zero-Ticket Bus Travel' (ZTBT) provides women with free travel in certain state-run buses, realising its benefits has proven difficult for many young women. Buses may arrive much earlier or later than expected, leading to women either having to endure long waits at the bus stop, or resort to alternative paid modes of transportation.

Some women also feared the gossip associated with leaving the village for work, as one woman shared: "I would come home at 10 p.m. and it was too late. People were talking badly about me."

With unreliable facilities and the pressure of social surveillance, the women in the village acknowledged that only "women with less commitment to their families will do fish selling". As a result, many young women have eschewed outward mobility pathways, and turned inwards to transform and adapt village-level constraints into strategies for pursuing their aspirations.

One of the most prominent ways they have negotiated employment within such imposed bounds is through the '100 days work' scheme. This social programme, formerly known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), is an initiative enacted by the Government of India, in which state-level governments provide at least 100 days of guaranteed employment per year (this has been raised to 125 days per household per year through a 2025 law) to any adult in a rural household, with wages set at the statutory minimum rate for both men and women. For the most part, registration for this programme is accessible to women in the village, but with the stipulation that they are native to the village.

While not specifically targeted towards women, the '100 days work' programme had become a woman-centric initiative catalysing economic advancement and financial literacy for those who do have the access to it. One of the women interviewees shared that they "can easily get loans from banks and other benefits with it. If [they] can't go outside for work, [they] can at least do [this programme]". For many, this programme allowed the women to secure financial stability within the social and spatial boundaries they face, as one woman explained: "The 100 Days Work is inside the village, that's why [her husband] allows it".

Beyond the guarantee of employment, the programme became an enclave of mutual support and collective resilience for its participants. Through their involvement in the programme, young women fostered a sense of solidarity with one another that often extends into pursuing other goals together. As one woman mentioned, "Because I am [part of] 100 Days Work, I know a lot of women, so the women support me well." The 100 Days Work programme thus served as a meaningful social space for building support networks for women, and oftentimes after completing the day's work, the women would continue to spend time together under the trees or by the beach and share stories over tea.

The programme has not only strengthened the material and communal reciprocity between the young women participating in the programme, but also promotes shared participation in other self-employment initiatives. For example, vetiver knitting as a self-employment opportunity is generally carried out collaboratively. As one woman said, "If 10 of us do it, we can knit more, and ask for more money." These social networks, built through spending time together through the programme, then eventually culminate into further opportunities and sharing of knowledge for other self-employment strategies.



Fisherwomen at a convivial gathering after a morning of exertion as part of the '100 days work' programme in Tamil Nadu, India

However, as previously mentioned, women's access to these social networks and communal support structures is contingent on their nativity to the village. For those not deemed native, this adds another layer of constraint, highlighting how different life factors may intersect to compound barriers to pursuing certain goals.

While the above examples highlight instances of young women redefining how they experience certain boundaries in order to aspire for better livelihoods, other young women have been actively pushing against them. In these situations, it becomes remarkably clear how intergenerational support affects young women's abilities to recalibrate their life trajectories. While some mothers aspired for their daughters to thrive within the current structures of the village, others desired to change these social realities for their daughters. One young woman told us, "My mother is my hero, she supports me in my studies (...) women are realising their self respect, but

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always very late. Even my mother realised too late for herself, but she realised it for me early.”

When young women receive such support from their mothers, it translates directly into concrete resistance against patriarchal constraints. With her mother’s advocacy and support, one young woman mentioned that she “didn’t face any barriers to work and study because [her] mother is supportive”, which empowered her to reject a marriage arrangement and prioritise her aspirations for employment.

This collective reimagination of intergenerational aspirations, where mothers

transform their own constrained capabilities into expanded possibilities for their daughters, is summarised by one of the mothers thusly: “I was not able to continue my dream, but my daughter should be able to.” Indeed, as Arjun Appadurai noted, “Aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life.” These women’s stories thus show us how they incrementally reclaim and redefine the boundaries of what they, and future generations of young women will, have the capacity to imagine and aspire towards. ■