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Women and the Sea: The Invisible Workforce of India's Coastal Economy

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Introduction

“Being a fisherman is challenging, and the fate of fisherwoman is even worse”¹ This is what the President of the Andhra Pradesh Traditional Fish Workers Union, Lakshmi Kovvada had to say when asked about the condition of fisherwomen.

The Indian coastline stretches to about 7516.6 km and also includes 5,422 km of island coastlines². There are millions of people who completely rely on the sea as their only way of livelihood and among those are women who work with just as much resilience as the men, if not more. From the pre-harvest fishing activities such as preparing fish gear, assessing fish stocks,

¹Lakshmi Kovvada, quoted in *India's Fisheries Policies Often Overlook Women Workers*, Mongabay (Feb. 3 2025), <https://india.mongabay.com/2025/02/fisherwomen-ride-the-rough-waves-while-indias-blue-economy-blooms/> (last visited July 9, 2025)

² See *coastal states of India: their coastline, characteristics & More!*, Textbook, <https://testbook.com/iad-preparation/coastal-states-of-india> (last visited July 9, 2025)

etc to post-harvest fishing activities such as handling the caught fish, storing of the fish, processing or even the marketing, the women are highly skilled and invested in it all but their hard work is often almost invisible to the others.

This blog aims to explore the significant but overlooked role of women in the sector, the challenges they face and the possible solutions which would result not only in the optimization of the sector but also ensure justice to the fisherwomen because unfortunately the law mainly remains silent on their rights and recognition.

Women in the Coastal Economy

Nationally, out of 28 million people in the fishing industry, 44% are women, including 47% in marine and 44% in inland fisheries.³ There are various such statistics that clearly show that women are the backbone of the fishing industry. Even though they may not actively go out to sea to fish, they are involved in several invisible crucial processes that keep the industry on it.

Not only are they part of fishing related work, but they also play a major role in value added fish products, essentially handling the entire value chain after the fish have been caught. From cleaning to marketing, women spend hours at markets and also go door-to-door in coastal states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu selling fish, a task that demands intense labor, marketing skills, bargaining skills, and long hours of standing and traveling. In Tamil Nadu, women account for 92%-95% of peeling and curing work, making it the top state for coastal fishermen.⁴ In Kerala, 67% of marine fisherwomen work full-time in fisheries and 45% of them are peelers.⁵

Maharashtra ranks just after Kerala in terms of the number of female marine fishers. Apart from

³ Tanuja S., *Women in Fisheries: Roles, Constraints and Recommendations*, Indian Farmer Vol. 11, Issue 4, at 107 (Apr. 2024), <https://indianfarmer.net/uploads/popular%20article%20women%20in%20fisheries-%20Dr%20Tanuja%20S.pdf>

⁴ Id. at 108-109

⁵ Id. at 107-108

these, many women are also involved in ornamental fish units and other fishing related microenterprises.⁶ The handling and cleaning of fish are often based on traditional knowledge passed down through generations. These tasks are time consuming, but from the only source of livelihood for many. Especially for small-scale fishers, women take on post harvest work, such as drying, salting, sorting, grading, storing and processing seafood, for example, for pickling or packaging.

Due to lack of recognition and support, most of this work is done informally, often in unhygienic conditions in poorly maintained spaces. Many women work from home or nearby community spaces with little to no job security. Some are part of cooperatives or community based groups, but in the absence of formal recognition they remain excluded from any kind of funding and institutional support. While women make up to 32%⁷ of the fisheries workforce in India, primarily in post harvest activities, they are often left out of government statistics and policy framework. Their contributions are overlooked, and their livelihoods are at risk due to the limited priority given to them by post policy makers and the law.

Challenges Faced

Saying that a fisherwoman's life is filled with challenges and struggles would be an understatement. Even though they play such crucial roles in the fishing industry, their lives are filled with constant obstacles, and often go unnoticed. These challenges are not just limited to gender discrimination. They also involve economic insecurity, legal invisibility, and

6 Id.

7 *India: Do women fish?*, Yemaya: ICSF's Newsletter on Gender and Fisheries, Issue 65, at 13 (2022), https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Yemaya_65_Do_women_fish_Nikita_-Gopal.pdf (last visited July 9, 2025)

environmental unpredictability. Women are so unrecognized and invisible⁸ because policy decisions and sociocultural structures are still predominantly patriarchal. As a result, their contributions remain unrecognized. They are severely underpaid and have low access to credit which leads to more production constraints for women compared to men. They have no access to storage technology or even proper cold transport facilities⁹, which often results in fish going stale and becoming unprofitable. That's just a straight up loss, and it's heartbreaking. After spending hours cleaning, sorting and preparing the fish, to have it spoiled because of things they can't control? It's completely unfair.

Since women's participation in the industry is not formally recognized, they have no social security. There is a critical lack of data on their involvement in pre-and post harvest fisheries activities. Sex disaggregated data is either not collected or simply not recorded and because of that policy decisions fail to be gender sensitive. Climate change is another serious concern. Many women are directly dependent on marine ecosystems to carry out their work, and they are among the first to feel the impact of declining fish, stocks, or extreme weather. Most women in the sector are paid only a daily wage with no contracts or protections.¹⁰ This leaves them extremely vulnerable to price drops, bad weather, or poor catch seasons. On top of this, the issue of safety is major, many women face harassment while working in male dominated spaces like harbors and markets.¹¹

⁸ Nitya Rao, *Both Visible and Invisible Women: Risk Taking and the Expansion of Fisheries Technologies in South India*, 47(3) GENDER & DEV. 381 (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2021.1946221> (last visited July 9, 2025)

⁹ Karthika Gopalakrishna, *Breaking the Nets: Fisherwoman Fight for Space, Safety and Support in Tamil Nadu*, PULITZER CTR., <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/breaking-nets-fisherwomen-fight-space-safety-and-support-tamil-nadu>. (last visited July 9, 2025)

¹⁰ Tanuja S., *supra* note 3

¹¹ Roshini Nair, *Fisherwomen Ride the Tough Waves While India's Blue Economy Blooms*, Mongabay, <https://india.mongabay.com/2023/08/fisherwomen-ride-tough-waves-while-indias-blue-economy-blooms/>. (last visited July 9, 2025)

Gaps in the Legal Framework

These challenges clearly show us that even today the fisherwomen's struggle and labor which are essential to the industry remains invisible, unprotected, and deeply undervalued by the law.

Now the Blue Economy and the Draft Policy Framework of India¹² emphasize boosting the GDP of the marine sector and creating jobs, but research shows that limited priority is given to women's employment in this framework. It largely views female fishers as indirect actors or categorizes them under "care work" completely ignoring their full contributions. Then comes the Sagarmala Program which focuses on port-led development, coastal shipping, and industrial corridors. But the reports rarely track any coastal community development pillar that includes fisherwoman. The impact of the Sagarmala Program has mostly been quantitative, and there has been no gender, disaggregated breakdown or evidence that shows women's benefit from this program.

The Maritime Vision 2030 and Amrit Kaal vision 2047¹³ are visions that basically set long-term goals, not just dealing with sports in particular or environmental protection, but also aiming for modern ports and renewable energy. However, there is very little to no actual commitment to inclusive growth. There have also been stakeholder consultations that often excluded Fisher for humans, including those unions¹⁴ which were led by women, making the process even more distant from being gender responsive.

12 Ministry of Earth Sciences, *Draft Policy Framework on India's Blue Economy*, Gov't of India (2021), <https://moes.gov.in/sites/default/files/BE%20Book.pdf>. (Last visited July 9, 2025)

13 Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, *Sagarmala: Concept and Implementation Towards Blue Economy*, Gov't of India (2021), <https://sagarmala.gov.in> (last visited July 9, 2025)

14 Supra note 11

Then there is the Pradhanmantri Matsya Pada Yojana¹⁵ and the FAO¹⁶ would help in filling major infrastructure gaps and provide training and subsidies, including for women beneficiaries. But even here, the scheme is framed, mostly around the modernization and value chains of the industry without ensuring direct benefits for women in small skill, fisheries or community based groups. So even the benefits are being distributed, because proper gender protection isn't in place. These benefits are often captured by larger fishers or Enterprises. The UNFAO strongly advocates for sex, disaggregated data and women's resources¹⁷ but the Indian policies that do exist mostly failed to implement these mechanisms that are required to enforce those recommendations.

Conclusion

India is a country that prides itself on coastal development. We've got the bay of Bengal on the east, the Arabian Sea on the west, and the Indian Ocean to the south. And yet, we still fall short when it comes to, including the very women who essentially carry the fishing industry on their backs. The work they do, most of which goes unnoticed, keeps the entire value chain running. The change that needs to happen must come through actions not just words and to be very honest even when it comes to words, the legal and policy framework don't yet have the language to represent these women. We're not even at the point of real acknowledgment yet I truly believe that visibility is the first step. The amount of work and hard labor. These women put in every day needs to be made visible and recognized. Only then can policies whether they're about protections or well faces or modernization or even infrastructure actually can involve

¹⁵ Department of Fisheries, PMMSY Guidelines, Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying (2020), https://dof.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-09/English_PMMSY-Guidelines.pdf. (last visited July 9, 2025)

¹⁶ Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Mainstreaming Gender in Fisheries and Agriculture*, <https://india.mongabay.com/2022/07>. (Last visited July 9, 2025)

¹⁷ Id.

women equally. Otherwise, the law continues to remain dominantly patriarchal if six disaggregated data is collected and recorded properly, it will reflect the true picture. And policies can finally be based on the reality, the reality that women are not just helpers or assistance in the fishing industry, but that they are the core workers with essential knowledge, skills, contributing throughout the entire fisheries value chain. They are not just an afterthought. They are central to the system. Supporting them with strong and inclusive policy measures won't just uplift their lives but it will strengthen the entire coastal economy.

Visibility plus policy is equal to empowerment. When we acknowledge, protect and support the women who keep our coastline alive, we don't just move towards justice, but we move towards true sustainable development. As Chine Youdon, the Head of the Blue Economy and Climate Change Cluster at the Maritime Think Tank, said: " Their voices and perspectives must be acknowledged, valued, and integrated into the policy framework to ensure sustainable and inclusive development." ¹⁸

Until that happens to be very honest, the Fisher women of India will continue to become the unsung strength of an industry that is basically surviving because of them, but even then ends up never thanking them.

¹⁸ Supra note 4

