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Problems & prospects of fisherwomen of Kashmir Valley

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Abstract

This article is a study of fisherwomen of the Kashmir Valley to highlight their social, economic, personal and health related issues. Fisheries is an important sector of food production, sufficing dietary protein requirement of the people, along with contributing to the market. Women, who constitute approximately half of Jammu & Kashmir's population play vital role in the fisheries sector, still they have been one of the most vulnerable groups among the poor in the state. The contributions of the fisherwomen penetrate every aspect of post-harvest handling and marketing of fish products and provide an integral link between producers and consumers. Increase in competition, diminishing resources and complex working conditions make work challenging for the fisherwomen. Among fisherwomen mobility is limited; hence they need some capacity building sessions & workshops which could enhance their skill & provide additional income to the family. Women entrepreneurs need to be encouraged in the fisheries sector. The various issues challenging empowerment of fisherwomen have to be seriously taken into consideration by the State Government while chalking out new development strategies.

Keywords: Fisherwomen, issues, empowerment, skill development

1. Introduction

Fishing is one of the oldest occupations of mankind. It provides sustenance directly and without much time lag between the effort and its results. Fisheries is a growing sector in Jammu & Kashmir economy which has been registering consistent growth during the past decades. Fish as food is especially important for every segment of the population providing a cost-effective and easily reached source of protein and essential micronutrients ^[1]. The market for fish has grown significantly in recent years largely fuelled by the image of fish as a healthy component of the diet.

Persistent poverty and deteriorating economic conditions have forced many women from poor rural households to work outside their homes who ventured into varied economic activities while at the same time continuing to perform their traditional household duties ^[2]. Women play significant role in fisheries sector, yet their roles remain unarticulated and unrecognised ^[3]. The major constraints faced by women in fisheries include limited control over resources, knowledge, training, finance, tools, little or no influence on the decision-making process especially in the public sphere, lack of proper infrastructure and support facilities for marketing and processing etc. ^[4].

Fisherwomen, known as Gadhi-wajni in Kashmiri, are one of the prime and oldest entrepreneurs of Kashmir – who retained their individuality even when modernisation ruled the roost. They are characterised by a unique style; donning an embroidered 'phiran' - a cloak combined with large earrings and a headgear. The role of the women in fishing largely relies on the socio-economic conditions of the households. Besides selling fish, the fisherwomen's role as a homemaker, is indispensable for the men to carry out other activities for livelihood support. Activities like cooking, childcare, children's education, family health and sanitation are exclusively looked after by fisherwomen. Post-harvest fisheries activities, especially those involving preservation of products over several days (like fish drying, salting, smoking) are also done by many fisherwomen. They sell the dried/smoked fish in markets fetching them good rates. The direct involvement of women in fisheries sector is in activities viz. cleaning, fish trading, making value - added products, fish curing, etc. The indirect role women play are concerning decision making, financial management, family welfare ^[5].

Overall, the conditions and quality of life for fisherwomen is generally deprived.

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This includes long working hours, poor income as compared to the men and in addition the burden of household maintenance. Though various problems are faced by fisherwomen, still they expressed interest to learn new skills and attend trainings to improve their status in the fishing sector to empower themselves. Investing in women capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choice is not only valuable itself but also the surest way to contribute to the economic growth and development.

Various extension programmes for the fisherwomen may constitute an appropriate educational tool for the transfer of technology and raising the socio-economic status of this section of the society [6].

2. Major problems confronted by the fisherwomen

2.1 Social Problems

In Kashmir, fisherwomen play either a role of a housewife or as a source of income generator through fishing jobs. The main social problems identified by them were dowry, lack of proper health care, less literacy among children, lack of cooperation among different fishermen and fisherwomen. Besides, women who are involved in fish selling face many problems like fluctuating market prices, unhygienic market places, lack of basic amenities in the market place. The main social issues confronted by fisherwomen of the Valley are given in Table 1. Perhaps an effective way of solving social problems is to get the fisherwomen to form a voluntary organisation through which they would be able to redress their grievances [7].

Table 1: Social problems of fisherwomen

1	Poor social status
2	Poor social acceptance
3	Lack of representation in cooperatives and other local bodies
4	Heavy dowry system
5	Lack of platform to express
6	Men do not take supportive role
7	Less interaction with development agencies

2.2 Economic problems

Most of the respondents rated poor income as the major economic problem. Lack of any alternate employment also leads to many complications. They are forced to borrow money & it becomes difficult to pay back the money; the vicious circle of indebtedness continues. The fisherwomen also indicated low price for products and lack of assured markets as the main constraints. They sell their products to local households and in markets because of lack of a proper marketing channel. The main economic problems faced by the fisherwomen of the Valley are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Economic problems of fisherwomen

1	Lack of proper marketing channel
2	Poor income
3	Lack of saving schemes
4	Lack of marketing information
5	Poor working capital

2.3 Technical problems

Technique affects the way in which people do things and as a system of knowledge, affect the ways of thinking. The main technical issues faced by the fisherwomen of Kashmir Valley are given in the Table 3.

Table 3: Technical problems of fisherwomen.

1	Lack of technical advice/supervision
2	Lack of training opportunities
3	Lack of innovative equipment & methods

2.4 Personal problems

When the women fishers were asked about the problems they experience at personal level, they listed a number of issues. It may be seen from Table 4 that ergonomic problems were rated as the most important issue. This is not surprising as the working conditions for most of the fisherwomen in the Valley, like other parts of India, is deplorable.

Table 4: Personal problems of fisherwomen.

1	Ergonomic problems
2	Lack of any alternate employment opportunity
3	Lack of ownership of assets
4	Irresponsible nature of counterparts
5	No time to look after household activities
6	Low literacy rate
7	No time / mind set to keep social contacts

2.5 Other Problems

2.5.1 Household Problems

The main household problems faced by the fisherwomen of Kashmir valley are unemployment, school dropout among children, matrimonial alliance problems and under-employment. Other problems like family disputes and debt were also pointed out by them. It appears that if fisherwomen could contribute to the family income these problems could by and large be resolved.

2.5.2 Education related problems

Literacy is considered as an indicator of development. However, the literacy level of the fisherwomen as well as their children is very low. Low literacy incapacitates their bargaining capacity in the market, thus divesting them of their reasonable price.

2.5.3 Health related problems

The fisherwomen carry loads of fish from the lakes/water bodies to the nearest markets every day. The women carry the fish on their head and with the load of 35-40 kgs, the pressure comes on their body, especially back. The fisherwomen are prone to diarrhoea and fever. Commonly seen disorders in fisherwomen of Kashmir are vitamin A and B complex deficiency apart from ailments like depression, hypertension and diabetes. Women are the worst affected and this is reflected by the imbalance in the sex ratio.

3. Empowerment of the fisherwomen

The word 'power' is a Latin word which means 'to be able'. 'Empower' in turn, means to make a person capable by giving power, strength or competence. In the particular context of this study, the word refers to enabling the fisherwoman to exercise her right to lead a happy life. It does not mean educating a handful of women and rewarding them with administrative positions in developmental programmes. It means preparing every woman to actively participate in the decision making process for a better livelihood. Empowerment is an active multidimensional process which should enable individuals to realize their full potential in all spheres of life. The fisherwoman's family finds it difficult to earn livelihood throughout the year. Therefore, the vast

potential available among the unemployed fisherwomen needs to be tapped, which can be done by making them capable of doing something remunerative on their own [8]. This, however, requires that the women are motivated, have a degree of awareness, the ability to think critically and take decisions, and above all possess a measure of self esteem. These are some of the parameters of empowerment.

4. Future prospects for empowerment of the fisherwomen

The various social, psychological, institutional, and economic issues challenging empowerment of fisherwomen have to be seriously taken into consideration while chalking out new development strategies. Researchers also have to pay sufficient attention for identifying the needs of fisherwomen and thereby generating women- friendly technologies. State Finance Corporations and financing institutions should initiate financial assistance programmes for the women fishers. The State Government also needs to adopt various development schemes for the fisherwomen for their socio-economic empowerment [9, 10].

The fisherwomen need to be given trainings regarding hygienic handling of fish. Improving quality and sanitation is important for improving marketing opportunities. There is need to ensure that they handle fish properly and the required food hygiene standards are met. Such trainings will improve their knowledge of good fish handling, processing, hygiene and sanitation practices. There is also need to provide trainings regarding scientific methods of smoking and drying of fish which preserves quality better as compared to the traditional methods. The skill enhancement of the fisherwomen will ensure good product quality and better market value. Trainings regarding other fish processing methods like preparation of fish fingers, fish cutlets, fish balls, fish samosa, fish pakora and fish pickles can also be conducted so that the fisherwomen take up new practices for improving their economic conditions. Areas in which fisherwomen are trained should focus on the product marketability and profitability.

In other states of India, cooperatives have been long seen as a social institution providing partnership, solidarity and resources to women farmers as well as tackle gender inequality & they have had quite a success. In many instances in which women are barred from participation, *women only* cooperatives have been seen as important tools in empowering and educating the women folk. There is an urgent need for cooperatives of women in different districts of the Valley which can enable & empower the fisherwomen folk as well.

5. Suggestions

- Various awareness/training programmes should be conducted from time to time in order to educate the fisherwomen.
- Vocational trainings should be organized for the farm women for their skill development.
- Healthy & cordial market environment should be promoted for the fisherwomen to address ergonomic issues.
- There should be proper platform where problems encountered by fisherwomen can be addressed.
- Women fishers should get support and encouragement from family, society, Government and financial institutions.

6. Conclusion

Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India: mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination. Women are an important human resource of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. Encouragement of the fisherwomen is one of the ways for economic growth & development of this community. But unfortunately it is seen that the traditional mind set of the society and negligence of the state and respective authorities are important obstacles in the fisherwomen development in the Valley. Therefore, there is need of continuous attempt to inspire, encourage, motivate women fishers. Investing in women capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choice is not only valuable itself but also the surest way to contribute to the economic growth and development. Women empowerment and thereby the community development through combined efforts of men and womenfolk requires a holistic approach. As Amartya Sen (2001) has rightly observed "there are no good reasons to abandon the understanding that the impact of women empowerment in enhancing the voice and influence of women does help to reduce gender inequality of many different kinds, and can also reduce the indirect penalty that men suffer from the subjugation of women".

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