

Challenges faced by Women Beach Workers: with special focus on Kollam District in Keralam

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Abstract— Women in workplaces face various challenges including gender bias, inequality in payment, safety and harassment and work life balance. Women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities play a vital role in the coastal economy through fish distribution, processing, and small-scale trading, ensuring the smooth flow of fish from landing centres to markets and households especially in regions like Kollam, Kerala. However, their work is largely informal, characterized by low and unstable income, lack of job security, and limited access to social protection. Therefore this paper examines the major challenges faced by women fish vendors, including poor working conditions, inadequate infrastructure, health risks due to physical strain and exposure to harsh weather, and limited awareness of welfare schemes. Using descriptive research design the study analyses primary data on issues related to livelihood insecurity, gender inequality, and occupational vulnerability. The study highlights the need for improved infrastructure, better access to institutional support, financial inclusion, and policy interventions to enhance the well-being and livelihood security of women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities.

Index Terms— Women fish vendors, Beach-based activities, Fisheries sector, Socio-economic challenges, Livelihood, Informal sector, Gender inequality, Welfare schemes

I INTRODUCTION

The fisheries sector stands as one of the most vital pillars of livelihood and economic sustenance in coastal regions, particularly in areas like Kollam, Kerala, where the sea shapes not only the economy but also the culture, identity, and everyday life of the people. Within this vast and dynamic sector, women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities

occupy an indispensable yet often invisible position. These women form the backbone of the post-harvest fisheries economy, tirelessly working to ensure that fish reaches markets and households efficiently. From the early hours of the morning until late in the evening, they are actively involved in a wide range of activities including sorting, cleaning, grading, processing, transporting, and selling fish. Without their continuous labour and dedication, the entire chain of fish distribution would face severe disruption. Despite their crucial contribution, women fish vendors and beach-based workers remain one of the most marginalized and underappreciated groups within the fisheries sector. Their work exists largely within the informal economy, where employment is uncertain, unregulated, and devoid of basic protections. They do not benefit from fixed wages, job security, paid leave, or adequate social security measures. A significant number of these women come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with limited access to formal education and skill development opportunities. This lack of educational and economic capital further reinforces their vulnerability and restricts their chances of social and economic mobility. The working environment of women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities is extremely challenging and often hazardous. They operate in open and unprotected spaces such as beaches, roadside markets, and temporary stalls where basic infrastructural facilities are either inadequate or completely absent. Access to clean drinking water, proper sanitation, storage facilities, and shelter is severely limited. These women are constantly exposed to harsh climatic conditions including intense heat, heavy rainfall, strong winds, and high humidity. The perishable nature of fish adds

further pressure, as they must work quickly and efficiently to prevent spoilage and financial loss. The physical demands of their occupation are immense. Women frequently carry heavy baskets of fish over long distances, travel early in the morning to landing centres, and spend long hours standing or walking in crowded and often unhygienic environments. Such strenuous activities expose them to a wide range of health problems including chronic back pain, joint disorders, muscle strain, skin infections, respiratory issues, and extreme fatigue. In addition to physical health risks, the psychological burden associated with economic insecurity, social marginalization, and work-related stress further affects their overall well-being. Income instability is another major challenge faced by women beach workers. Their earnings are highly unpredictable and depend on multiple external factors such as fish availability, seasonal variations, market demand, and government-imposed fishing bans. During lean seasons or adverse weather conditions, their income may decline drastically, leaving them with little or no financial security. In the absence of savings or access to formal credit systems, many women are forced to rely on informal moneylenders, often at high interest rates, leading to cycles of debt and financial dependency. Although various government welfare schemes and support programs have been introduced to improve the conditions of fisher folk and allied workers, their benefits do not always reach women beach workers effectively. Many women face barriers such as lack of awareness, insufficient documentation, bureaucratic delays, and limited institutional outreach. As a result, a large section of this workforce remains excluded from social protection measures that are meant to support them. Furthermore, deep-rooted gender inequalities and patriarchal norms continue to limit their access to resources, decision-making power, and social recognition, both within the household and the wider community. In light of these conditions, it becomes essential to undertake a comprehensive and in-depth study of the challenges faced by women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities. The present study aims to critically examine their socio-economic conditions, working environment, occupational hazards, and access to support systems. By bringing their lived experiences to the forefront, this research seeks to highlight the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that shape their

lives. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute towards the formulation of inclusive policies, improved infrastructure, and targeted interventions that can enhance their livelihood security, promote gender equity, and ensure sustainable and equitable development within coastal communities.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

- ❖ The socio-economic realities and occupational challenges faced by women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities have increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly within the broader discourse on informal labour, gender inequality, and coastal livelihoods. Across developing regions, and especially in coastal states like Kerala, women fish vendors constitute a vital yet systematically neglected segment of the fisheries value chain. A growing body of literature highlights that while these women play a central role in sustaining local economies and ensuring food distribution, their contributions remain largely invisible within formal economic frameworks and policy considerations.
- ❖ Nair and Menon (2021), in their extensive study on women fish vendors in Kerala, emphasize that these workers form the backbone of fish marketing systems, bridging the gap between production and consumption. Their research reveals that a majority of women vendors belong to economically marginalized communities with minimal access to education, formal employment, and financial resources. The study further underscores that their income is not only low but also highly volatile, fluctuating with seasonal fish availability, climatic conditions, and market dynamics. The authors strongly advocate for structural interventions such as improved market infrastructure, access to institutional credit, and inclusion in formal welfare systems to ensure economic stability.
- ❖ Joseph and Varghese (2020) provide a critical examination of the harsh and often hazardous working conditions experienced by women in beach-based occupations. Their findings portray a vivid picture of women working under extreme environmental stress, exposed to scorching heat,

heavy rainfall, and unsanitary conditions without access to basic facilities such as clean drinking water, sanitation, or proper shelter. The absence of cold storage and preservation infrastructure further intensifies their vulnerability, leading to frequent spoilage of fish and consequent financial losses. The study also highlights the severe physical toll of such labour, documenting widespread health issues including chronic back pain, musculoskeletal disorders, fatigue, and long-term occupational health risks.

- ❖ Devi and Kumar (2019), in their socio-economic analysis of women fish vendors in South India, delve deeper into the intersection of gender, labour, and poverty. Their study reveals that women vendors not only endure economic hardships but also face deep-rooted social marginalization and gender-based discrimination. Despite their significant economic contributions, their work is often undervalued within patriarchal social structures. The dual burden of managing household responsibilities alongside physically demanding work results in time poverty, emotional stress, and reduced quality of life. The study further highlights the financial exclusion of these women, noting their heavy reliance on informal credit systems that often trap them in cycles of debt and economic dependency.
- ❖ Rajan et al. (2022) explore the effectiveness of government welfare schemes aimed at supporting fisher folk and allied workers. While acknowledging the existence of multiple welfare initiatives such as pensions, financial assistance, and health insurance, their study reveals a significant gap between policy formulation and actual implementation. Women fish vendors, in particular, face numerous barriers in accessing these benefits, including lack of awareness, bureaucratic complexities, documentation issues, and inadequate outreach by authorities. The authors stress the urgent need for more inclusive, transparent, and accessible welfare delivery mechanisms to ensure that marginalized groups can fully benefit from such programs.
- ❖ Mathew and Thomas (2023) shift the focus towards collective empowerment mechanisms, particularly the role of self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperative societies in improving the socio-

economic status of women fish vendors. Their findings suggest that participation in SHGs enhances financial inclusion by providing access to microcredit, savings opportunities, and collective bargaining power. Additionally, these groups serve as platforms for social support, skill development, and community engagement. However, the study also points out significant limitations, including uneven participation, lack of awareness, and limited financial literacy among women, which restrict the full potential of these initiatives. Strengthening such grassroots institutions is identified as a key pathway towards sustainable empowerment.

- ❖ Beyond these individual studies, the broader literature consistently highlights the structural vulnerabilities faced by women in informal coastal occupations. Issues such as income instability, lack of job security, inadequate infrastructure, occupational health risks, and social marginalization emerge as recurring themes. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the fisheries sector—shaped by environmental changes, market fluctuations, and policy regulations—adds another layer of complexity to their livelihoods. Seasonal fishing bans, climate change, and resource depletion further exacerbate their economic insecurity, making them one of the most vulnerable groups within coastal economies.
- ❖ In this context, the present study assumes significant importance as it seeks to bridge these gaps by offering an in-depth and contextually grounded analysis of women beach workers in Kollam. By synthesizing insights from existing literature and building upon them, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the structural inequalities, lived experiences, and everyday struggles of these women. Ultimately, the review of literature underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies, improved infrastructure, enhanced institutional support, and gender-sensitive interventions to uplift the socio-economic conditions of women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities.

III STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study focuses on women beach workers in coastal areas like Kollam, who play an important role in the

fisheries sector but face many socio-economic and occupational challenges. Their work is often informal and undervalued, and they carry a dual burden of managing both household and income activities. They work long hours in harsh conditions with poor facilities and unstable income. Many also suffer from health problems and have limited access to welfare schemes and support systems. These issues affect their livelihood and well-being, highlighting the need for focused study and intervention.

IV OBJECTIVE

To analyse how socio-economic conditions influence the challenges faced by women beach workers.

V METHODOLOGY

The study uses a quantitative approach, which involves collecting and analysing numerical data to understand patterns and relationships.

The study uses descriptive research design to examine the socio-economic conditions and challenges of women beach workers. It analyses their profile, working conditions, income, health, and support systems using quantitative methods in a structured way.

The study was conducted in Shakthikulagara Harbour, Thangasheeri, Rampuram, and Neendakara Harbour under Kollam district, targeting key coastal and harbor areas where women are actively engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities. From the sample area primary data were gathered using a structured interview schedule through simple random sampling.

Based on the available records and local sources, the total number of women beach workers in the selected coastal areas of Kollam district was identified as 811. For this study, a total of 80 samples were collected

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

Women Beach Workers: Women engaged in fish vending and other beach-based activities.

Fish Vending: Buying and selling fish in markets or through door-to-door distribution.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Women Beach Workers: Women involved in fish vending and beach-based activities in selected areas of Kollam.

Fish Vending: Buying fish from landing centres and selling in markets or door-to-door.

Fisheries Sector: Activities related to fishing, processing, and marketing for livelihood.

VI MAJOR FINDINGS

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The findings show that fish vending in the study area is largely carried out by Christian women, who make up 76.3% of the respondents. The age details show that most of the women engaged in fish vending are older, with an average age of 61 years, and some even continuing to work up to the age of 82. The youngest respondent is 39, which means very few younger women are entering this field.

The findings show that most of the women (72.5%) live in their own houses, which gives them a sense of stability and security despite their financial struggles. The data shows that a large majority of the women, 71.3%, hold BPL (Below Poverty Line) ration cards, which means most of them come from economically weaker backgrounds. This reflects the everyday financial struggles they face and how important government support is for their survival.

The marital status of the respondents shows that while most women (63.8%) are married, a significant 36.3% are widows. This means that more than one-third of these women are living and working without the support of a husband. For many of them, fish vending becomes the main source of survival for themselves and their families.

About 70% completed only primary education, and 25% are illiterate, while just 5% managed to reach secondary school. This suggests that many of them may have left school at an early age, possibly due to poverty, family responsibilities, or the need to start working.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEM FACED BY WOMEN BEACH WORKERS

The challenges faced by women beach workers are influenced by various factors such as economic instability, poor working conditions, health issues,

lack of infrastructure, and limited institutional support. These factors together affect their livelihood, well-being, and overall quality of life. Women engaged in fish vending and other beach-based activities often experience unstable income due to seasonal variations, market demand, and availability of fish.

In addition, they work long hours in difficult conditions such as exposure to heat, rain, and unhygienic environments, with inadequate facilities like sanitation, drinking water, and proper storage. The physically demanding nature of their work leads to health problems such as back pain, joint pain, and fatigue.

Moreover, limited awareness and access to government welfare schemes and support systems further increase their vulnerability. Although economic and working condition-related problems are the most significant, issues related to health, infrastructure, and social support also play an important role in shaping their socio-economic status. Overall, these challenges highlight the need for immediate attention and effective measures to improve the living and working conditions of women beach workers.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN FISH VENDING AND BEACH-BASED ACTIVITIES

While women beach workers play a crucial role in the fisheries sector, they face numerous challenges that affect their livelihood, health, and overall well-being.

A. Economic Challenges

Low and Unstable Income: Women engaged in fish vending often depend on daily sales, which are highly uncertain and influenced by factors such as fish availability, seasonal changes, and market demand. This leads to irregular and insufficient income.

Lack of Financial Security: Most women work in the informal sector without savings, insurance, or financial support, making them economically vulnerable.

B. Working Conditions

Long Working Hours: Women beach workers spend long hours in physically demanding tasks such as carrying fish baskets, sorting, and vending.

Exposure to Harsh Environment: They work in open beach areas under extreme weather conditions like heat, rain, and humidity, which negatively affect their health and productivity.

C. Health Issues

Physical Health Problems: Continuous physical labour leads to health issues such as back pain, joint pain, fatigue, and muscle strain.

Lack of Healthcare Access: Many women have limited access to proper healthcare services and often ignore health problems due to financial constraints.

D. Infrastructure Problems

Lack of Basic Facilities: Basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation, shelter, and proper storage facilities are inadequate in most working areas.

Poor Market Conditions: Fish vending areas are often overcrowded and unhygienic, affecting both workers and customers.

E. Social Challenges

Gender Discrimination: Women beach workers often face low social status and lack recognition for their contribution to the fisheries sector.

Work-Life Burden: In addition to their work, they are responsible for household duties, leading to increased physical and mental stress.

F. Lack of Institutional Support

Limited Awareness of Welfare Schemes: Many women are not fully aware of government welfare programs meant for fisher folk.

Difficulty in Accessing Benefits: Even when aware, they face challenges in accessing these schemes due to lack of information, documentation, or support systems.

G. Occupational Challenges

Seasonal Nature of Work: The availability of fish and income fluctuates with seasons, affecting livelihood stability.

Market Competition: Women face competition from middlemen and larger vendors, which reduces their profit margins.

H. Safety and Security Issues

Unsafe Working Conditions: Working in crowded markets and isolated beach areas can expose women to safety risks.

Lack of Protection Measures: There are limited safety measures or support systems to ensure their protection at workplaces.

I. Lack of Organizational Support

Absence of Strong Unions or Groups: Many women work individually without collective bargaining power.

Limited Social Support Networks: Weak institutional and social support systems make it difficult for them to address their issues effectively.

J. Changing Environmental Conditions

Impact of Climate Change: Changes in weather patterns and marine resources affect fish availability, directly impacting income.

Environmental Hazards: Coastal erosion and pollution also create additional risks for their livelihood.

VII FUTURE ENHANCEMENTS AND DIRECTIONS

The socio-economic development of women beach workers requires focused interventions and long-term strategies to improve their livelihood, working conditions, and overall well-being. Based on the findings of the study, several future directions and enhancements can be suggested to address the existing challenges and ensure sustainable development in this sector.

Improvement in Infrastructure Facilities – There is an urgent need to improve basic infrastructure in beach and market areas where women work. Proper facilities such as clean drinking water, sanitation, storage systems, and sheltered vending spaces should be developed. Better infrastructure will not only improve their working conditions but also enhance the quality and hygiene of fish vending activities.

Strengthening Financial Support Systems – Women beach workers require better access to formal financial services such as bank loans, microcredit, savings schemes, and insurance. Strengthening self-help groups and cooperative societies can improve their financial stability and reduce dependency on informal moneylenders.

Enhancing Awareness of Welfare Schemes – Although several government welfare programs exist for fisher folk, awareness among women beach workers remains limited. Future efforts should focus on increasing awareness through awareness campaigns, training programs, and community

outreach activities to ensure that more women can benefit from these schemes.

Health and Safety Interventions – Considering the physical strain and health risks associated with fish vending, there is a need for regular health check-ups, medical camps, and occupational safety measures. Providing protective equipment and improving workplace hygiene can significantly reduce health problems such as back pain, joint pain, and infections. Skill Development and Training Programs – Organizing skill development programs can help women improve their business skills, financial literacy, and fish processing techniques. Training in value addition, marketing strategies, and alternative livelihood options can increase their income and economic independence.

Promotion of Women Empowerment Initiatives – Empowering women beach workers through education, awareness, and participation in decision-making processes is essential. Encouraging their involvement in local governance, cooperatives, and leadership roles can improve their social status and bargaining power.

Strengthening Institutional Support – There is a need for stronger institutional support from government agencies, NGOs, and fisheries departments. Simplifying procedures for accessing welfare schemes and ensuring proper implementation can help reduce the gap between policy and practice.

Market Development and Better Access – Developing organized fish markets with proper facilities and reducing the role of middlemen can improve profit margins for women vendors. Improved transportation and storage facilities can also help in reducing losses and increasing income.

Environmental Sustainability Measures – Sustainable fishing practices and environmental protection are crucial for the long-term livelihood of women beach workers. Awareness programs on environmental conservation and support for sustainable practices should be encouraged.

Research and Policy Development – Further research should be conducted to continuously assess the changing socio-economic conditions of women beach workers. The findings can help policymakers design more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies that address their specific needs.

VII CONCLUSION

The study on the challenges faced by women beach workers highlights the multiple difficulties they experience in their daily lives and occupations. Women engaged in fish vending and beach-based activities play an important role in the fisheries sector, yet they face several economic, social, and occupational challenges that affect their livelihood and well-being. The findings show that women beach workers often struggle with unstable income, poor working conditions, lack of basic infrastructure, and various health problems due to the physically demanding nature of their work. In addition, limited awareness and access to government welfare schemes and institutional support further increase their vulnerability. Social factors such as gender inequality and the dual responsibility of managing both work and family also add to their challenges. Overall, the study emphasizes the need for immediate attention to improve their working conditions, provide better support systems, and increase awareness of available welfare programs. Addressing these challenges through proper policies and interventions will help enhance their livelihood security, health, and overall quality of life, while also recognizing their valuable contribution to the fisheries sector and coastal communities.

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