

LIVELIHOOD ISSUES OF FISHERWOMEN IN KERALA DURING COVID-19-A STUDY ON CHERAI COASTAL AREA.

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Abstract

For centuries, Kerala's geography was hallowed with moderate climate and scenic locations. The narrow strip of land, 35 to 125 km wide and 580 km long, is wedged between the Western Ghats and Arabian Sea. The state had witnessed for many issues as natural calamities continuously for the last years. In this entire situation, the fisher folk in Kerala played an important role to save the life of people. Their continuous and hardworking mentality always helped to save the life of many in Kerala. One of the important fact is that, during this pandemic situation of Covid-19, the fisher folk sector in Kerala, in its strengthening bounds have many threats such as socio-economic deprivation, low income, low catch results, over exploitation of marine resources, indefensible harvesting and also vulnerability to hazards correlated to whether changes. This entire situation has a serious alarming threat on their production and progress of fisheries sector, which depends on the marine resources. When considering the whole sects of people in Kerala, the fisher folks are the most affected people due to climate threat and the continuous issues related with this. This study deals with the livelihood issues of fisherwomen in Kerala with special reference to Cherai coastal belt. The fisheries sector is an important source of livelihood for women. The fisherwomen in Kerala play an important role in the fisheries sector in terms of their involvement in fishery related activities viz., fish vending, fish drying, prawn peeling, sorting, grading, fish packing, and net making. The related factors for the livelihood issues provide a way for the domestic abuse of this section.

Key words: fisheries, over exploitation, vulnerability,

Fisheries in India are an important sector of food and nutritional security. More than nine million active fishers directly depend on fisheries for their livelihood of which 80% are small scale fishers. It employs over 14 million people and contributes to 1.1 per cent of the Indian GDP. 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 (Swaminathan, 2011). Above all, Women play significant roles in all aspects of fisheries; both in the artisanal, small-scale sector and in the commercial sector, yet their roles remain unarticulated and unrecognized. The major constraints faced by women in fisheries include limited access and control over resources like water, land, boat, crafts and gear, knowledge, training, finance, tools, technologies, information technologies, 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. (Shyam et al., 2011). Fishing villages are deprived of basic amenities such as health care facilities, transportation and communication facilities, water supply and electricity (Dehadrai, 2002). When considering the health condition of women in fishing sector, they face continuous issues like anemia, malnutrition and vitamin deficiency in fishing communities especially among fisherwomen and children. In addition, poor awareness/ knowledge in the areas of health, nutrition and child care finely tuned their troubles (Shyam . S. Salim and R. Geetha 2013). Women fish vendors are considerably affected due to the lockdown as there is no fishing activity in some places, only limited

boats are available for fishing. The low catch brought to the landing centres subjected to high demand. Even when few women purchase affordable amount of fish from the landing centre for street vending, due to the pandemic situation, people are not purchasing the fish. Customers are also seen bargaining for lower price. Due to this, their income has totally reduced and they are facing difficulty to manage their families. The laborers engaged in the sector are severely affected. Usually fishing laborers take an advance from boat owners during the lean/ban fishing period. But now boat owners too are facing financial problems due to the pandemic situation. So laborers are finding it difficult to meet family expenses. Those who had migrated from Tamil Nadu to other states like Kerala and Karnataka for fishing activities are now without work. Some fishers have informed that their family is having only one meal per day. (M.S Swaminathan Research Foundation,2020)

The main objective of the study was to document the livelihood problems faced by the fisher women due to covid-19 in the study area. In this livelihood option among this community, their mental health analysis is also has a greater role to play in the study. During the past three decades, fisheries are a prime and growing sector in the Kerala economy with a consistent growth of 5-6%. Important components of fishing industry includes fish catching, processing and marketing and it provides employment to over 3.5 lakh personnel who constitute nearly 5% of the workforce of the state. The exact amount of fishing population is very small in the total population. Though the state is having only less than 10% of the country's total coastline, water front contributes about 25% of the country's fish catch. In this situation, Kerala was noted as the leading producer and consumer of fish, due to the presence of a very rich marine wealth with a large variety of fish and a highly skilled population of (Aerthayil, 2000).

The spread of coastal line in Kerala with the major coastal state of the nation with 590 km, having 222 fishing villages and 187 landing centers, altogether considered as the significant exporter of marine products and host of various fishing communities, The marine fish production has been over 6.6 lakh tonnes with the people. Kerala houses a fishermen population of around 6,10,165 with a density of population 2740 people per fishing village which is much higher than the country average of 1099. (Marine Fisheries Census 2010).

The intensity of the situation raises the fact that, during the time of Covid-19, the real painful misery of the collapse in livelihood pattern of the fisherwomen started in the study area. Apart from this, they are not in a good position in their mental health. Even though it is difficult to assess the mental health, most of them are not relaxed in their mental settings. Domestic abuse in the study area has increased when comparing with the non- fisher women. Mental health is a term used to depict either a level of cognitive or emotional well-being or an absence of a mental disorder. Generally, Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and unspecified psychological distress are 2–3 times more common among women than among men; whereas addictions, substance use disorders and psychopathic personality disorders are more common among men.

It is well-documented that during a war, a natural disaster or a pandemic, women's bodies bear the worse brunt of the crisis. Domestic violence against women is already widespread and under-reported in India. Now, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations recognises domestic violence against women as a "shadow pandemic". In India, the National Commission for Women has reported a large increase in distress calls from victims of domestic violence since the pandemic broke out.

Globally, women in fishing communities play multidimensional roles that include livelihood, household, reproductive and community ones. Their involvement in fisheries value chains are often considered as invisible, inspite of being active in a wide range of harvest and post activities both in capture and culture fisheries. It is estimated that out of the total population depending on capture fisheries, 47 per cent are women (World Bank, 2012).

Methodology

Methodology is the description, explanation and justification of various methods of conducting research. Cherai village in Ernakulam district of Kerala has been chosen for the study. The study was done through Telephone survey by Simple Random Sampling technique. For conducting the survey a sample size of 50 respondents of fishing community were randomly selected. The important variables considered for the study indicators for the livelihood issues of the fisherwomen. The study was designed to be conducted among the fisherwomen with a sample of 50 women. In order to expand an enhanced understanding of the immediate socio-economic drive of the pandemic and lockdown on fisherwomen in Kerala a phone survey was conducted. The immense bulk of households reported tremendous decline in income and employment.

Indian scenario of Fisherwomen

In India, women constitute about 50% of the population and comprise one-third of the labour force. Women contribute significantly to the fishery sector of the Indian economy (Ashaletha et al., 2002). Women are more numerous than men in processing (57%), the most industrialized component of fisheries related activities, where they represent 32% of the total, while they account for only 5% of the total in fishing (Barbaroux et al., 2012). In fish processing factories surveyed in India, 60% of workers were young women (Madhu 1989).

In Kerala, Directly providing employment to about 3.86 lakh people and indirectly to more than that, the Kerala fisheries sector is on its way to progress amidst many inherent socio economic issues prevailing in the sector (Jasna P. T., Palai, Sanghamitra 2016).

“Increased incidence of extreme events such as storms, floods and drought will affect the safety and efficiency of fishing operations, flow of rivers, area covered by wetlands and water availability and will have severe impacts on fisheries. Sea level rise will have effects on the coastal profile and livelihoods of communities. The potential outcome for fisheries may be decrease in production and value of fisheries, and decline in the economic returns from fishing operations” (E. Vivekanandan). The recent occurrence of the cyclone, Okhi along the Kerala coast is a relevant example of how the livelihood of the fishing community was affected. Storm surges, which curb the boats from going in the offshore areas, also reduce the prospects of a better catch. Fishing is mainly dependent on seasons and a poor or delayed monsoon, which affects the indigenous and seasonal fishes and thereby, the seasonal harvests also. Floods can hamper the livelihoods of the fishing community, affecting the poor infrastructure and fishing activities. (Vivekanandan,2011).

Table 1 Livelihood issues of fisher women according to its precedence and importance as professed by the fisherwomen

Sl. No.	Livelihood issues	Rank
1	Alcoholism in the family	3
2	Loss of fishing opportunity	2
3	Poverty	1
4	Financial exploitation by others	15
5	Inadequate transport facilities	17
6	Inadequate educational facilities	16
7	Confusions in meeting the day to day expenditure	11
8	Unemployment	5
9	Gender discrimination in the society	21
10	Inadequacy of food	10
11	Inadequacy of water	12
12	Threat of climate change	4

13	Lack of purchase from the general public	18
14	Sexual exploitation	20
15	Inability to utilize welfare interventions of the government	13
16	Non reach of government supports and other welfare measures.	19
17	Inadequate medical facilities	7
18	Inadequate housing facilities	14
19	Nutritional insecurity	9
20	Social exclusion and discrimination	8
21	Domestic violence	6

When analyzing their livelihood issues they have assigned their primary role to the poverty as their first rank in livelihood issues. In general, however, for the unorganised and semi-organised workforce, who accounts for about 80 percent of India's workforce, this meant reverse migration, food shortages and loss of a sustainable livelihood. Most of the small scale fishers operate in low numbers from one to five. They sustain on the daily catch for home, community consumption and local sale. Here most of the women have no other options to continue their living strategies.

In the study area, Fisherwomen account for half of all small scale fishers. The sale of the catch is dominantly carried out by this demographic and the pandemic situation means no catch; thus no sale. Fish and fish commodities were not included in the list of essential commodities initially, with several state governments imposing complete lockdowns on markets. This situation negatively affected their life and living options.

Intensity of Domestic violence among the women.

Cherai fishing village is located at ward 14 of Pallipuram Gram Panchayat. The village has a total of 382 houses and 423 households. Apart from all the issues faced by the Fisherwomen they are in the middle of serious domestic abuse. Domestic violence can be verbal, financial, psychological and sexual. It includes the abuser with holding financial or medical assistance. Women are most often the caregivers for those quarantined at home and already infected with the virus, which makes them more vulnerable to contracting the disease. Domestic violence is rooted in the inequities of power and control. The abusers feel an enormous loss of power and control over their own lives due to the pandemic. They vent their frustration on the women in the house. Livelihood issues are the most important problem faced by the fisherwomen. They face lot many issues along with their mental, physical, financial and domestic issues.

Violence and abuse

According to an eye-opening United Nations report, around two-third of married women in India were victims of domestic violence and one incident of violence translated into women losing 7 working days in the country. Furthermore, as many as 70% of married women between the ages of 15 and 49 years are victims of beating, rape or coerced sex. The common forms of violence against Indian women include female feticide (selective abortion based on the fetus gender or sex selection of child), domestic violence, dowry death or harassment, mental and physical torture, sexual trafficking, and public humiliation. The reproductive roles of women, such as their expected role of bearing children, the consequences of infertility, and the failure to produce a male child have been linked to wife-battering and female suicide. The NICE Domestic abuse quality standard (QS116) is used to highlights symptoms or conditions which are indicators of possible domestic violence or abuse:

Table 2

Indicators	8. Genitourinary symptoms infections
1.Symptoms of depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders	9. Vaginal bleeding or sexually transmitted infections
2.Suicidal tendencies or self-harming	10. Chronic unexplained pain
3. Alcohol or other substance misuse	11. Traumatic injury, particularly if repeated and with vague or implausible explanations
4. Unexplained chronic gastrointestinal symptoms	12. Problems with the central nervous system – headaches, cognitive problems, hearing loss
5. Unexplained gynaecological symptoms, including pelvic pain and sexual dysfunction	13. Repeated health consultations with no clear diagnosis. The person may describe themselves as ‘accident prone’ ‘silly’
6. Adverse reproductive outcomes, including multiple unintended pregnancies or terminations	14. Intrusive 'other person' in consultations, including partner or spouse, parent, grandparent or an adult child (for elder abuse).
7. Delayed pregnancy care, miscarriage, premature labour and stillbirth or concealed pregnancy	

Source: The NICE Domestic abuse quality standard (QS116)

Table. 3 Ranking of domestic abuse faced by the Fisher women and non fisher women

Indicators	Rank	Rank
	Fisher women	Non fisher women
Hit, slapped, restrained or hurt you physically	3	4
Afraid of your partner? Previous partner	2	1
Unsafe in your home situation	6	3
Partner like to boss you around	1	5
Possibility of forced sex	5	6
Uncomfortability in sexual things	7	8
Partners threatening or hurt	4	2
stopped you from leaving home	8	7
say in how to spend money	9	9

Table 4

Correlations				
			Rank of fisherwomen	Rank of non-fisherwomen
Spearman's rho	Rank of fisherwomen	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.717*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.030
		N	9	9
	Rank of non-fisherwomen	Correlation Coefficient	.717*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	.
		N	9	9

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level here. There is a significant difference between the domestic abuse level of fisher women and no-fisher women. In general, there are many reasons for the complete distress among the fisher folk community as a whole. The general situation affected to a great degree on the women as a whole. The pandemic situation has left fisher folk in the lurch, as the prevailing situation has forced them to dump their catch back into the sea in some places. The fishing community in Kerala is forced to throw back into home following the closure of ice factories and fishing harbours, and in the absence of transportation facilities to move their cargo. Fish varieties such as mackerel, tuna, squids, ribbonfish, catfish and prawns have been dumped into the sea, as there are no facilities to stock the cargo at the landing centers. It is estimated that around one lakh tones of the catch was thrown away. Fishing community in many parts of the country is grappling with huge losses. Besides fisher folks, workers in fish landing centers, ice factories, vendors etc are all struggling. The fishing sector here is facing a crisis due to climate change, migration of fish wealth etc, which has resulted in a poor catch. Only traditional country crafts are concentrating on offshore and coastal waters to meet the demand.

“The fisher folks also survive on whatever they get from daily fishing, it is quite similar to daily wage earners. Without fishing they have no other livelihood source. They should be considered for support against the loss of their livelihood. “This may delay fishing activities even after the extreme situation is over, because it is not possible to venture into the sea without the annual maintenance works. At the community level, economic backbone of the fisher folks has already broken due to the lockdown disrupting fishing activities during the peak season. “They don’t have money to repair their boats and nets to quick start fishing after the monsoon ban which would push them to further financial hardships in the coming days. Moreover they are silently having the fear of climatic changes in the nearby future. Every year they are facing this issue in a very serious manner.

The state of financial misery is bound to threaten food and nutrition security in the fishermen community. It may lead to more distress migration of youth and families in the coastal villages. However, it needs to ensure that nobody dies hungry in a state of lockdown. Leaders of the community sought the government to come to the rescue of fisher folks and create opportunities at the earliest to ensure their survival and recovery from the current state of life.

Conclusion

There is growing public fear and panic regarding the outbreak. The most important outbreak of this pandemic situation for the fisher women is that, they got completely stacked with socio-economic deprivation and stagnation in livelihood strategies. Due to the complete shutdown in their activities they lost all the significant ways to their life. Eventhough they are equipped with some sorts of healthy package by the Government, the most important issue lies in their mental setup. They can provide some sorts of immediate help to overcome this situation is , Include sale of fish, especially local catch from small scale fishers and the community, into the village and town horticulture shops that are currently selling vegetables and essentials to the villages and cities across the country. Additional hygiene advisories can be issued for sale of fish during the lockdown. Monetary compensation must be allocated to registered societies than to individual accounts. Most often the domestic abuse at home and the resultant mental deprivation made them completely idle in the home and in the society. It primarily results in discrimination against families and acquaintances of quarantined and isolated people which would eventually risks everyone. To combat these, spreading awareness, fact-checking, making services transparent and people-friendly are essential.

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