

**Women: The Backbone of Fisheries**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Fisheries are considered a cornerstone of global food security, economic development, and poverty alleviation. Worldwide, more than 120 million people depend on fisheries for their livelihood. Women play an extremely important role in this sector, as their active participation is visible at nearly every stage. After fishing, women are primarily engaged in sorting, drying, processing, storing, and marketing fish. Their hard work sustains household income and makes value-added products available in local markets. In rural and coastal areas, women are often the main breadwinners of their families, using fish sales to cover expenses for education, healthcare, and daily needs. Nearly half of the total workforce in fisheries consists of women, contributing across the entire value chain—from fishing to processing, marketing, and leadership. Despite this, women's contributions are often overlooked and undervalued. Gender disparities persist in resource access, decision-making, and leadership opportunities. According to FAO, only 14% of women are

directly engaged in the primary production sector, but their participation in secondary and small-scale fisheries is much higher. Women face challenges such as wage inequality, limited access to resources, lack of technology, and exclusion from fisheries management. The rise of modern cold storage and retail markets has also threatened the livelihoods of traditional women fish vendors. Economic burdens and health issues add further stress to their lives. However, these challenges can also serve as opportunities for change. Through gender-inclusive policies, training, women's empowerment, and sustainable fisheries management, their roles can be rightfully recognized and the full potential of the fisheries sector can be realized.

**WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION IN FISHERIES**

Women's contribution to fisheries is highly significant. They ensure availability and sustainability of fish products through post-harvest work such as sorting, drying, and storage. In processing and value addition, women play a large role by producing dried

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fish, pickles, sauces, and other preserved products, which enhance income. At the marketing stage, women interact directly with consumers, contributing to household sustenance. In rural and coastal regions, fish selling is the primary income source for many families. Women's self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives provide them access to credit, training, and markets. These groups strengthen their collective power and promote economic empowerment. Thus, women's role in fisheries extends beyond household duties and contributes significantly to community development.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN FISHERIES

### Invisible Contribution

Although women form nearly half of the fisheries workforce and contribute across fishing, processing, marketing, and leadership, their work is often unrecognized. In particular, their post-harvest roles in processing and marketing are rarely acknowledged in official statistics, policies, or development programs. Their labour is often viewed as an extension of household responsibilities rather than formal economic contribution. This neglect results in limited access to financial resources, lack of training, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Globally and nationally, most fisheries policies remain "gender-blind," and data collection often excludes women's

contributions in small-scale and secondary fisheries. As a result, women's economic roles are under-recorded and under-supported, restricting their empowerment and progress.

### Economic Inequality

Women in fisheries face inequalities in wages, access to tools, technology, and markets. Despite institutional efforts to bring gender inclusiveness into fisheries development, gender equality and women's empowerment remain major challenges. Women fish vendors face obstacles at every stage of their work, and modern retail outlets pose continuous threats to their livelihoods. Household debt repayment responsibilities further increase their stress, alongside health issues such as back pain, headaches, and vision problems. Declining resources, growing competition, and tough working conditions make their work increasingly difficult. Restricted mobility also limits their access to eco-friendly technologies that could provide additional family income. Lack of income security, credit and insurance facilities, and inadequate social protection further increase the vulnerability of fishing communities.

**Workplace Challenges:** Women in fisheries encounter multiple issues in their workplaces:

- ⇒ **Unstable working conditions:** Lack of access to healthcare, childcare, and legal support increases their vulnerability.

- ⇒ **Harassment and violence:** Women face risks of sexual harassment and violence.
- ⇒ **Increased workload:** Seasonal male migration for labour increases women's burden, while competition reduces their resource access.
- ⇒ **Physical and mental stress:** Women fish vendors experience constant stress from heavy workloads, law-and-order issues, and local disruptions, which also reduce their income.
- ⇒ **Restricted mobility:** Limits their ability to access eco-friendly technologies that could generate additional income.
- ⇒ **Shrimp peeling work:** Women spend long hours seated peeling shrimp, leading to back pain, joint problems, and eye strain.
- ⇒ **Market issues:** In fish markets, women face unhygienic conditions, lack of cold storage, high transport costs, and competition from modern outlets.

## Environmental and Resource Limitations

- ⇒ **Declining fish stocks:** Lack of storage and preservation facilities disproportionately affects women, increasing post-harvest losses and reducing income.

- ⇒ **Exploitative practices:** Competition for limited resources sometimes forces women into transactional compromises.
- ⇒ **Challenging work conditions:** Increasing competition, depleting aquatic resources, and difficult work environments make women's roles even more demanding.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN FISHERIES

### Recognition and Valuation of Work

- ⇒ **Acknowledging contributions:** Recognizing women's roles across the fisheries value chain ensures gender-sensitive policies and better access to resources.
- ⇒ **Data collection:** Gathering gender-disaggregated data helps highlight women's roles more clearly and improves policy effectiveness.

### Capacity Building and Training

Providing women with training in sustainable fishing, financial management, and modern processing technologies can increase productivity and profitability. Gender-sensitive programs enhance women's skills, confidence, and community ownership. Current initiatives include:

- ⇒ **Training and skill development:** Focused programs in

fishing methods, aquaculture, and related skills.

⇒ **Technology adoption:** Encouraging women to use modern technologies to improve efficiency and opportunities.

⇒ **Access to financial resources:** Providing loans, insurance, and savings facilities allows women to invest in better equipment and diversify livelihoods. Women-led cooperatives increase bargaining power, and financial inclusion programs offer microfinance, subsidies, or grants to support women's fisheries enterprises.

### Participation in Decision-Making

⇒ Involving women in fisheries management institutions ensures their voices are heard in policy processes.

⇒ Transparent governance structures with both men and women foster equitable resource distribution and sustainable fisheries management.

⇒ Promoting women's active participation in decision-making ensures their perspectives are integrated into policy formulation and implementation.

### Improvement in Working Conditions

Providing access to healthcare, childcare, and legal support creates safer work environments. Infrastructure such as cold storage can reduce post-harvest losses and

stabilize women's incomes. Addressing women's occupational health needs helps ensure safer and healthier working conditions. Childcare centers and support services allow women to balance work and family responsibilities in this demanding and irregular profession.

### Environmental Sustainability

Training women in sustainable practices secures long-term fisheries resources and strengthens food security for both communities and the industry.

### CONCLUSION

Women's roles in fisheries are vital but remain underrecognized. Through targeted initiatives capacity building, financial inclusion, policy reforms, and improved working conditions gender-based challenges can be addressed, empowering women to fully contribute to sustainable fisheries management. Recognizing women's contributions not only promotes gender equality but also strengthens the resilience and sustainability of fishing communities worldwide.