



Gender Roles and Economic Contribution of Women in Small-Scale Fisheries in Rural India

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Abstract: *Women have been recognized as indispensable contributors to small-scale fisheries in rural India, yet their roles have often remained under-documented and undervalued. The present study had been conducted to assess the gender-based division of labour, economic contribution, livelihood dependence, and challenges faced by women engaged in small-scale fisheries. Primary data had been collected from 80 respondents across selected rural fishing communities, supported by secondary literature for contextual analysis. The findings had revealed that women had been actively involved in post-harvest activities, including fish processing, marketing, and value addition, while their participation in capture fisheries had remained limited due to socio-cultural constraints. Despite lower visibility, women had contributed significantly to household income, accounting for a substantial share of fisheries-related earnings. However, gender disparities had been evident in access to resources, decision-making power, and institutional support. Key constraints had included limited access to credit, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalization. The study had emphasized the need for gender-inclusive fisheries policies, capacity-building initiatives, and improved market access to enhance women's economic empowerment and sustainability of small-scale fisheries.*

Keywords: *Women in Fisheries, Gender Roles, Livelihood, Small-Scale Fisheries, Rural India, Economic Contribution.*

1. Introduction: Small-scale fisheries have been widely acknowledged as vital components of rural economies in developing countries, providing employment, nutrition, and livelihood security to millions of households. In India, inland and coastal fisheries have supported a diverse range of stakeholders, among whom women have played a significant yet often underrecognized role. Women's participation has been particularly prominent in post-harvest activities such as fish processing, drying, sorting, and marketing, which have ensured the continuity of fisheries value chains (Bennett, 2005).

Historically, fisheries research and policy frameworks have been male-centric, focusing primarily on capture fisheries and overlooking the contributions of women. As a result, women's roles have often been categorized as supplementary rather than central, despite their substantial involvement in income generation and household sustenance. Gender-based division of labour has been shaped by socio-cultural norms, which have restricted women's participation in fishing activities while encouraging their engagement in processing and marketing sectors.

In rural India, women engaged in fisheries have faced multiple challenges, including limited access to credit, lack of ownership over productive assets, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These constraints

have not only reduced their economic potential but have also reinforced gender inequalities within the sector (FAO, 2020).

The present study had therefore been undertaken to examine the gender roles and economic contribution of women in small-scale fisheries in rural India. The objectives had included analyzing participation patterns, assessing income contribution, identifying challenges, and suggesting policy measures to enhance gender equity in fisheries.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Area and Sampling: The study had been conducted in rural fishing communities of Malda district, West Bengal, eastern India, where small-scale fisheries have been widely practiced. A total of 80 respondents had been selected using purposive sampling, with emphasis on women actively engaged in fisheries-related activities.

2.2 Data Collection: Primary data had been collected through structured questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions. Information had been gathered on socio-economic characteristics, roles in fisheries, income contribution, and constraints.

Secondary data had been obtained from published research articles, government reports, and fisheries databases.

2.3 Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics, percentage analysis, and comparative interpretation had been applied. Gender-based differences had been analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

3. Results

3.1 Gender-based Division of Labor: The division of labour in small-scale fisheries had been distinctly gendered, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender roles in fisheries activities

Activity	Male Participation (%)	Female Participation (%)
Fish capture	85	15
Net making/repair	60	40
Fish processing	20	80
Fish marketing	35	65
Value addition	25	75

The results had indicated that men had dominated capture fisheries (85%), reflecting traditional gender norms that had restricted women's access to fishing activities. In contrast, women had been predominantly engaged in fish processing (80%), marketing (65%), and value addition (75%), demonstrating their critical role in post-harvest sectors.

The relatively higher female participation in net repair (40%) had suggested their involvement in supportive activities within the fisheries value chain. These findings had highlighted the invisibility of women's contributions, as their roles had often been confined to informal and low-recognition sectors.

3.2 Economic Contribution of Women: Women’s contribution to household income had been significant, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Contribution to household income

Contribution Level	Percentage of Households (%)
<25%	20
25–50%	45
>50%	35

The findings had revealed that in 80% of households, women had contributed at least 25% of total income, while in 35% of households, their contribution had exceeded 50%. This had demonstrated that women had been key economic contributors rather than secondary earners.

Despite this substantial contribution, women’s income had often remained undervalued due to lack of formal recognition and wage disparities. The results had emphasized the need to acknowledge women as primary economic actors in fisheries.

3.3 Livelihood Dependence

Table 3. Dependence on fisheries for livelihood

Level of Dependence	Percentage (%)
Primary source	60
Secondary source	30
Supplementary	10

The majority of respondents (60%) had depended on fisheries as their primary livelihood source, indicating high reliance on this sector. Women’s involvement had therefore been essential for household survival and economic stability.

3.4 Access to Resources

Table 4. Access to resources

Resource	Access (%)
Credit facilities	30
Training programs	25
Market infrastructure	40
Government schemes	20

Access to institutional resources had remained limited. Only 30% of women had access to credit, while participation in training programs had been low (25%). This had indicated systemic barriers preventing women from enhancing their productivity and income.

3.5 Constraints Faced by Women

Table 5. Major constraints

Constraint	Severity
Lack of credit	High
Poor infrastructure	High
Gender discrimination	High
Limited mobility	Moderate
Market competition	Moderate

Women had faced multiple socio-economic constraints, with lack of credit and infrastructure being the most severe. Gender discrimination had further restricted their participation and decision-making power.

4. Discussion: The results had demonstrated that women had played a central role in small-scale fisheries, particularly in post-harvest activities. Their contributions had been critical for maintaining fisheries value chains and ensuring household income stability.

The gendered division of labour had reflected deep-rooted socio-cultural norms that had limited women's access to capture fisheries. However, their dominance in processing and marketing had indicated their adaptability and resilience.

The economic contribution of women had been substantial, yet undervalued. Similar findings had been reported in previous studies, which had highlighted the invisibility of women's labor in fisheries (Harper et al., 2013).

Limited access to resources and institutional support had emerged as major barriers. Addressing these constraints would require gender-sensitive policies and targeted interventions.

5. Conclusion: The study had highlighted that women had been indispensable contributors to small-scale fisheries in rural India. Their roles in processing, marketing, and value addition had significantly contributed to household income and food security. However, gender disparities in access to resources and decision-making had limited their full potential. Strengthening institutional support, improving infrastructure, and promoting gender-inclusive policies had been identified as essential steps toward sustainable fisheries development.

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