

# The Status of Fisherwomen in Andhra Pradesh

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*Fisheries is an important sector contributing to the Indian economy. This study of fisherwomen from a village in Andhra Pradesh provides data collected from 1,180 respondents. It presents facts of the women's home and work lives and the areas where there is room for their betterment.*

## Introduction

The important challenges that India is now facing are in the areas of household food sufficiency, nutritional security, gender equity, unemployment and environmental sustainability. India is made up of villages and nearly 70 per cent of its population lives in villages and earns its livelihood from agriculture and related activities. Not only land, but also the sea is a major source of income and employment, especially for the people who inhabit villages in coastal areas. Fisheries is an important sector contributing to the Indian economy. Fishing is an ancient occupation but until recently it was viewed as a supplementary enterprise practiced by the community of fishermen at a subsistence level (Krishnan et al. 2000). The industry is now being transformed due to the

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changing market scenario, technological advancements and national policies.

Women's contribution to agriculture is a known fact; their contribution in the fisheries sector is also recognised. Research studies have shown that women play an active role in fish marketing and processing. Nevertheless they are relegated to the fringes of development. They undertake the care of the family when the men are away at sea and are compelled to work and earn to make ends meet. Nearly 27,000 fisherwomen in Andhra Pradesh are involved in fish marketing; around 2,500 work in prawn peeling units and 24,521 in curing and processing (Marine Fisheries Census 2005). Although the involvement of women in fish harvesting is extremely negligible, their participation is quite pronounced in post-harvest processing and marketing activities. Once the fish reaches the shore it is the women who play an active role, following the pattern observed in Karnataka (Bhatta and Rao 2003) Kerala, (Ashaletha 2000; Selvaraj et al. 2000) and Tamil Nadu (Drewes 1986). Women's participation is dominant in marketing. They are habituated to their traditional activities and tend to work nearer their homes.

### The Village

The state of Andhra Pradesh has a coastline of 974 km set with 498 fishing villages. The fisher folk population in the state is 509,991 with an average family size of 3.95 (Marine Fisheries Census 2005). Nuvvularevu is a gorgeous small compact village in the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh that has been dominated by fishermen's families for generations. It is a nucleated village and the residents dwell in clusters which accounts for their well-knit social life. As their ancestors were migrants from Orissa some 300 years ago, their culture is a mix of the cultures of the two states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Their society is tradition-bound and the people are very conservative. The total population of the village was 6,125 of whom 2,428 were women at the time of our survey between December 2004 and March 2005. Social and economic backwardness have reinforced their poor status. Breadwinning activities of the people are mainly fishing and related activities. Although the

community is bound to traditions in this village, as the days go by they are becoming aware of their rights and needs and also about new opportunities.

The inhabitants of this village are a neglected group and form a part of the vulnerable sections of Indian society. They are prone to scores of problems both in their occupation and in their day-to-day activities. Women are members of the workforce be it at home or outside. They have their own culture, values, taboos, mores and folkways. Women's role is dominant in this society. Nearly 80 per cent of the women in the community are involved in income earning activities.

## Methodology

The case study method was adopted in this survey. 'The case is a social unit be it a person/ group/social institution/district or community' (Young 1966). Case studies are usually characterised as thorough examinations of specific social settings or particular aspects of social settings including details that provide a psychological description of the persons in those settings (James and Dena 1976). A broad array of quantitative and qualitative data was collected from 1,180 fisherwomen, nearly 50 per cent of the total female population of the village. The data was collected over a period of three and a half months. The team consisted of two scientists, four technical persons and one technical officer who lived in the village to collect data. Attempts were made to grasp the pattern of an individual's life and its many facets. Since the village was studied as a total entity data pertaining to various levels of social dimensions were also obtained. The instruments for data collection were records, reports, the interview schedule, personal discussions, participatory rural appraisals and non-participatory observations.

Analysis through the gender lens is an approach which enables us to note the differences between gender categories with respect to activities, access and control of resources and benefits, decision making, knowledge, problems and factors that determine and influence these. Such an exercise is valuable in justifying the

inclusion of target categories such as women in development projects with sustainable interventions, addressing both practical and strategic needs.

## Educational Status

Every individual could be empowered with functional literacy to make them aware about their basic rights and responsibilities. The target of the National Literacy Mission (NLM) in India is 100 per cent literacy. The NLM also seeks to impart functional literacy to all non-literate persons in the age group of 15–35 years. In this village it was found that 82 per cent of the fisherwomen were illiterate, 16 per cent had a primary level of education and only 2.5 per cent had been to high school. Generally boys are sent to school while girls are kept at home to help with housework and childcare, in keeping with the all-India pattern.

## Men's Work

In coastal states, bigger players with capital have entered the fisheries sector as financiers, export agents and boat owners and it is this chain that controls the industry, especially the trade in higher value fish (Salagrama 2002). Export oriented fish are more valuable (tuna, shrimps, squids, crabs, prawns). Commercial fishing methods have become efficient, using large nets and factory ships.

The fishermen in Nuvvularevu are artisanal fishermen who operate traditional boats. The catch they get comprises mugiles, sardines, prawns, anchovies, crabs, clupeids and miscellaneous fish, an assortment that is not commercially valuable. There are thirteen *pedda padava* (masula boats) in the village. Each craft accommodates 20 to 30 fishermen. There are two types of ownership: (a) joint ownership among relatives and members of the family, and (b) joint ownership with others. The method of fishing is traditional and seasonal. The fishermen do not work for companies here. On an average the men get an annual income ranging between Rs. 6,000 and Rs. 8,000 depending upon the catch.

## Women's Work

With meagre access to capital, information and technology, fisherwomen in India tend to handle low-value fish or trash fish for the domestic market. They face increasing problems in getting access to fish catches. The fact that fish landings are more centralised and often at great distances from the fishing village has not made the situation easier, as women are forced to travel longer distances, as in Sri Lanka (Amarasinghe and Kumara 2002). Khader (2008) stated that the seasonal character of their vocation and its hazards coupled with uncertainty of catches cast a shadow on fisherwomen's limited livelihood opportunities. In Nuvvularevu, fishing is small-scale and not organised as a big industry. There are no processing plants, export firms or ice plants in the village.

**Table 1**  
Involvement of Women in Different Activities

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Women involved (%)</i>
Fish selling/drying	60
Salt panning	10
<i>Matti</i> work	20
Others*	10

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

**Note:** \*includes tailoring, grocery/vegetable shop.

As Table 1 shows, nearly 60 per cent of the women are involved in fish marketing and fish drying (Selvaraj 2000 also stated in his study of Kollam district in Kerala that in the non-motorised category, most of the women are involved in marketing fish).

In our village ten per cent of the fisherwomen are involved in salt pan works and 20 per cent in *matti* (mud) work (mainly, brick making) or work as labourers. Some women also act as commission agents and get 10 to 12 per cent of the total cost of the fish as commission. The quantity of fish they purchase (for marketing) ranges from 25 kg to 60 kg a day; this depends solely upon fish availability. The amount they spend on purchases at the landing centre from the fishermen (who fish near the shore where commercially valued

fish are not caught) ranges from Rs 200 to Rs 400 per day. The fish they procure are mainly sardines, clupeids, anchovies, prawns and crabs. A few women (about 10 per cent) buy from middlemen who buy in bulk from the fishermen when the harvest is considerable.

The hour at which they begin their day depends upon the time of arrival of the catch. While they walk to nearby villages (Narasinghapetta, Chappara and Sompeta) to sell the fish they travel by bus or auto rickshaws to the interior villages. Transportation costs are around 10 to 15 per cent of their expenses. The nearest market is in Kasibuga, which is about 15 km from the village. Women also go to distant Parlakhemundi and Gunupur towns of Orissa to market their wares. After selling the fish they return home at night or sometimes on the following day. Some women vend from home. The income they get varies according to the fish they sell. On an average they earn Rs. 50 to Rs. 70 as profit in a day. The number of working days ranges from 90 to 120. The annual income of the women on an average ranges from Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000. The men pool their earnings with the women.

## Decision Making

If an individual has a say in family affairs it is a strong step towards empowerment. The decision making role of the women seems to have changed substantially over the years. This could be because of the declining joint family system. Men dominate as decision makers in fishing related activities and social functions, because they alone participate in these areas. Women make decisions in their separate spheres of fish selling and home management. It is clear that decision making has a direct relation to the work people do. This was also reported by Anitha (2002). Ninety per cent of the women are involved in earning an income and have a say in household decisions. It is women who run the household, and save money to purchase gold. Thus women control the money they earn and even have some to give to the men (Table 2).

The spheres for men and women are clearly demarcated. Most of the household tasks like cooking, fuel and drinking water collection are done by girls and women.

**Table 2**  
**Decision Making**

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Initiates</i>	<i>Decides</i>	<i>Implements</i>
Money management	Women	Both	Women
Children's education	Women	Both	Men
Marriage	Women	Both	Both
Health	Women	Men	Both
Social decisions	Men	Men	Men
Fishing	Men	Men	Men
Fish selling	Women	Women	Women
House management	Women	Women	Women

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

## Marriage

Mass marriages are conducted once in two years during February and March. Early marriages are declining and the age at marriage for women is now 18 years and for men it is 21 years. Matches are fixed within the community. Rs 40,000 to Rs. 50,000 is spent on marriage celebrations. No dowry system is in practice. Divorces are very rare and once a child is born divorce is forbidden. Brides are selected from their place of origin in Orissa but girls are not 'given' to men there.

## Time Utilisation

The time utilisation pattern helps to identify the judicious use of time by women. Use of technology might enhance their income as well as grant them more time for leisure (Table 3).

Eight hours (35 per cent of their time) are spent on economic activities. Women in Kerala spend nearly seven hours in fish trading as reported by Ashaletha (2000). Fuel collection and fetching drinking water consumes 10 per cent of their time. If drinking water is not available in the village they have to go as far as 2 or 3 km to collect it and this they find very hard.

## Life Expectancy

Female life expectancy is more than male life expectancy. This may be due to the hard labour of men coupled with poor nutrition.

**Table 3**  
**Time Utilisation Pattern**

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Time spent (%)</i>
Income earning activity (fish selling, drying, salt panning, <i>matti</i> work)	35
Household activities	5
Taking care of children	10
Fuel collection	10
Educating children	–
Collection of drinking water	10
Leisure	30

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

Though they harvest fish, they do not consume it much. Intake of country liquor by men may also be one of the reasons for their lower life expectancy.

### **Access to Development and Services**

Although the women are involved in economic activities their access to the few development schemes and services that exist is limited. The various factors contributing to this are lack of education, low financial status, inadequate infrastructural facilities, lack of motivation and social backwardness.

There are 26 self-help groups (SHGs) in the village each of which has 10 to 15 women members. The bank gives loans to groups in proportion to the size of their membership. Most women take loans to purchase fish, as reported by Rao (2000). They do not have a problem in paying back the loan. The SHG in Palakayatippa, a fishing village close to Vijayawada city, for example, has changed the lives of fisher folk in a short span of time; they are now prosperous and do not depend on the government for any help (*The Hindu* 1999). Their example could be followed in this village.

It can be seen from Table 4 that a high degree of discrimination exists in getting wages and employment. Ashaletha (2000) also reported that wage discrimination and occupational segregation are noticed among Kerala fisherwomen. When women work as labourers, they get lesser wages than men. The daily wage for



**Table 4**  
**Gender Discrimination**

<i>Areas</i>	<i>Degree of discrimination</i>
Getting wages	***
Getting employment	***
Societal recognition	**
Social participation	*
Decision making	*
Spending money	*
Purchasing things	*
Nutritional status	*
Healthcare	**
Recreation activities	**
Marriage	**
Education	**
Religious functions	**

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

**Note:** \* Indicates low level of discrimination; \*\* Indicates medium level of discrimination; \*\*\* Indicates high level of discrimination.

men is Rs. 50 whereas women receive Rs. 25. In getting employment also they face a high degree of discrimination. They face medium level of discrimination in the case of healthcare, marriage, education and religious functions.

Women are not given much importance in healthcare. When it comes to marriages, the girls are not given enough freedom to select their life partners whereas men are allowed more freedom to select their brides. Few girls are sent to school. In social participation, decision making and spending money the fisherwomen did not feel restricted. Since the women are workers and earn an income they have economic freedom of sorts.

### **Possession of Assets**

Most family assets are in the name of the male head of the family whereas if a woman heads the family they are in her name. Moreover, women do not feel that they should possess assets in their own name as they are usually not involved in financial operations such as mortgages.

## Problems Faced by the Women

Problems faced by the women are ranked according to their magnitude as perceived by the women themselves (Table 5).

**Table 5**  
**Problems Faced by the Women**

<i>Problems</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Caste categorisation	I
Alcoholism	II
Lack of drinking water	III
Fuel collection	IV
Sanitation facilities	V
Healthcare	VI
Dowry system	VII
Few educational facilities	VIII
Less time to take care of household activities	IX

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

Caste categorisation is regarded as their prime problem by the women. Since their caste was not included by the authorities in any category, they do not receive any benefits from the government. The next problem ranked by them is men's alcoholism, the cause of their economic backwardness. Ramakrishnan et al. (2000) in their study on fishermen of Tamil Nadu also reported the same problem. Collection of drinking water takes up much of the women's time. There are no proper sanitation facilities either. This affects the health and hygiene of the people in this village. As a result, they are prone to contagious diseases. Since there are few schools, their children are not able to continue their education. Dowry is also slowly emerging as a problem in their society. These are some of the issues of major concern, which should be taken into consideration by government authorities when seeking to uplift the people in this village and the fisher community in general.

## Work related Problems

Apart from the common problems suffered by the poor in un-developed regions in daily life, the women are beset by specific

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problems in their work lives (Table 6). The problems faced by fisherwomen in most of the coastal states are more or less similar.

**Table 6**  
**Work Related Problems**

<i>Work related problems</i>	<i>Order in rank</i>
Lack of work in lean season	I
Physical strain in carrying fish to the selling point	II
Low income	III
Lack of credit	IV
Exploitation by middlemen	V
No drying yards	VI
Wage discrimination	VII

**Source:** Primary data collected from respondents.

As reported by the women 'lack of work in the lean season' is a major problem. When there is no fishing, the women remain unemployed for they do not have any alternate employment. Since they do not have any skill-oriented training for self employment they remain unemployed during this entire period. The villagers do not have land; hence they cannot start income generating enterprises such as agriculture, dairying and poultry. Women complain of the physical strain built into their occupation; for instance, to reach the landing centre they have to cross brackish water and then they have to walk 2 to 3 km to sell their fish in the local market. They find it very difficult and exhausting. Further, the low prices they get for selling fish of low value implies a low income. With this little income they find it hard to run their households. Credit is not easily given to them by banks and for obtaining money they depend on moneylenders. Excess fish, which they are not able to sell the same day, is put out for drying. Since there is no common drying platform, they find it difficult to dry the fish properly and in a hygienic manner. In turn the price they get for dried fish is even less. Wage discrimination is also a problem but only in occupations other than the marketing of fish. Suggestions to enhance the living standard of the women include:

- Provision of skill-oriented training for self employment
- Alternate livelihood options during the lean season through mariculture practices

- Subsidies to start small-scale enterprises
- Educating the women to know their rights
- Counselling for men for de-addiction so that the women may benefit
- Provision of drinking water facilities in the village so that women's time can be saved
- Development of a good marketing network
- Health education for women
- More self-help groups
- Setting up of solar dryers in the villages

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