

Gender and fish-preneurship development

Nikita Gopal

Principal Scientist, EIS Division,
ICAR - Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin - 682029

Introduction

Fisheries as a sunrise sector of the Indian economy has been the focus of the development discourse as a means of providing diversified employment opportunities. An enterprise is basically any undertaking or project for achieving larger goals which may have economic, or social dimensions. While fisheries is as such a sector that is propelled by private investment – whether it is in fishing systems or in the seafood processing sector, the vast majority of the fishing community continues to remain socio-economically backward. Thus there is need to encourage diversified entrepreneurship in the sector.

While enterprise and entrepreneurship is as such gender neutral, there is need to look at the specifics in fisheries. Fisheries, one of the oldest food producing systems in the world, can broadly be grouped into capture (wild caught or harvesting the available resources) and culture (production under controlled or relatively conditions with specific inputs akin to farming. Activities in fisheries can be pre-harvest (in the run up to the actual fishing-making and mending fishing nets; building, maintaining and repairing fishing boats; preparing the aquaculture ponds, feeds and other inputs for culture etc.), harvest (actual process of catching the fish) and post-harvest (all activities that succeed the harvest like sorting, icing, marketing, processing etc.). And when looked at from the point of view of gender, in fisheries generally it is accepted that 'men fish' and 'women process and market'. However there is sufficient evidence to show that the roles are not always so compartmentalized, and estimates of women workforce in the sector range from 30 to 46% (FAO, World Bank, IFAD, 2008; SOFIA, 2012). Women venturing into the seas for fish harvesting aboard fishing vessels may not be so common (<https://www.thebetterindia.com/12415>) but there are several instances of women engaged in fishing. Women glean oysters, sea cucumbers, snails, sea urchins and other sedentary aquatic animals from near shore waters or shallow sea bottoms. Women use various gear like scoop nets, traps, gill nets, hook and line to harvest fish from inland water bodies. Women dive and harvest seaweeds in Tamil Nadu (<https://thelogicalindian.com/exclusive/seaweed-collectors/>); shrimp seed from inter tidal regions in estuaries; and crabs in marshes. Most of these activities are small scale and at a subsistence level.

Women dominate post-harvest fisheries. Activities include sorting, auctioning, marketing; drying; smoking; salting; fermenting; and other seafood industry oriented pre-processing and processing. Some of these spaces are however being taken over by men (not necessarily from the fishing communities) due to spatial changes in landing points and markets (Gopal *et. al.*, (eds). 2012). The most prominent and visible role of women in fisheries is that in marketing.



Helping separate fish from the net



Women vendors

Though women function as auctioneers and wholesalers in landing centres, the majority of auctioneers and wholesalers are still men. Since auctioneers play a major role in financing fishing activities, ability is a deciding factor in women in taking up this role. However women auctioning fish is now being observed in many places. Wholesaling is again credit intensive and requires

the ability to arrange for large sums of money, which again is a limiting factor in many women being in the trade. However, in Gujarat and Maharashtra, and the North Eastern states fisherwomen wholesalers are seen and they manage large quantities of fish. The other drawbacks that fisherwomen face are difficulty in transportation, storage, handling bulk quantities, tie-up with middlemen, besides lack of access to credit from institutional agencies, and this has resulted in fewer women taking up these major marketing functionary roles and remain restricted to retailing smaller quantities of fish.

Their presence in the marketing chain is indispensable in their role as retailers, in designated and undesignated markets or as head load fish marketers. In most fish markets we find women selling fish, and this is the one sight that is common across most states in India. About 50-70% of the fisherwomen and their families are dependent on fresh fish marketing and traditional fish processing for their livelihoods in the southern maritime states (Khader, 2005; Gopal et al., 2009).

Processing activities are taken up to offset fish wastage during glut seasons. Fish has been dried, salted, pickled and stored for centuries. Fish processing is another area where women make significant contributions. The seafood export sector, which utilizes 6% of the marine catch, also employs large numbers of workers to grade, pack, and freeze seafood products for export.



Women in seafood processing factory

While fresh fish marketing and traditional fish processing remain the preferred activities of fisherwomen in the southern states, vocations in other fish-related activities are also available. Though skill is defined as the ability or talent to perform a task well or better than average, the work done by women comes under the 'unskilled' or 'semiskilled' category as its thought

that women do not require formal education for their employment (Salim, 2013).

Women's roles and extent of participation in aquaculture value chains (fish, shrimp and seaweed farming, crab fattening) seem even higher than in fisheries. This is especially true for Southeast Asia, where women's engagement ranges from 42-80% in Indonesia and Vietnam (Kaing and Ouch, 2002; Williams et al., 2005). India, inspite of having a huge female population, still doesn't show much female participation in aquaculture. Shaleesha and Stanley (2000) explain the reasons as location of aquaculture sites in remote areas and also several socio-cultural taboos. In India women can be seen engaged in carp breeding and nursery rearing, carp polyculture, catfish breeding, freshwater prawn breeding, ornamental fish breeding, feed preparation, culture of Spirulina and Azolla. Ornamental fish breeding has been a part of women in West Bengal. Women in India are mainly associated with aquaculture through the prosperity of Self-Help-Groups (SHGs). Through SHGs women in small units come together and get engaged in aquaculture activities like breeding, feed preparation etc.. These SHGs are also helpful in promoting savings habit and also provides small and short term loans at lower interests.

Women oriented entrepreneurship in fisheries

Considering that half the fisher population is women, and also that their employment is slowly being taken over by men, it is imperative that their skills are developed for gainful employment. While alternative employment would imply getting employed in other sectors, there is also ample scope for employment within the fisheries sector. This is espoused through a couple of successful case studies from the state of Kerala.

The Society for Assistance to Fisher Women (SAF)

The Society for Assistance to Fisher Women (SAF) set up in 2005 by the Department of Fisheries, Govt. of Kerala, as a registered Society has a 'mandate to work for the empowerment of fisherwomen across Kerala state' focuses on diversification of employment and development of skill of fisherwomen. It functions through the concept of activity groups where small groups of women are formed and they are given technical training and assistance to start an enterprise. Besides fish based enterprises there are other popular and demand driven enterprises like food business, tailoring units, provision stores etc. Products are branded under the name 'Theeramythri' (which is also the name of the broad scheme that SAF operates after the amalgamation of other tsunami related assistance schemes of the Department of Fisheries into SAF). The strategy has been to identify and train beneficiaries and provide financial and technical support to

start enterprises. There is also branding and marketing support through exposure in various exhibitions and opening of specific stalls for sale of products.

The over 2000 activity groups in all the coastal districts of the state of Kerala have now been federated and an Apex body the 'SAF Activity Groups' Apex Federation – SAAF' has been established. This has been done with an intention of achieving economies of scale with opportunities for better sourcing of raw material and marketing of products and hence achieving economic viability.

Assessments of group activities by various workers have shown that organizing women into groups has advantages like building platform for exchange of ideas and sharing problems and risks. However intrinsic and extrinsic factors are not always viable and there are several reasons for closure of activities which can include lack of knowledge and skills, technology, credit; poor marketing. and negative intragroup dynamics (Nikita et. al, 2010; Gopal et. al., 2010).



Fish based enterprise



Flour making unit



Tailoring unit

All images Courtesy: <http://safkerala.org/gallery.php>

Enterprise development initiatives for women by ICAR-CIFT

The ICAR-CIFT, Cochin also has initiatives in community level fish based enterprises for women. In a World Bank funded NAIP project, the group based approach was adopted and three **post harvest activity clusters** of 10 fisherwomen of the *Chellanam Kandakadavu Fishermen Welfare Development Cooperative Society* who was a Consortium Partner were formed. This was done after a series on stakeholder meetings over 7 months. Specific capacity building programmes were organised for the selected fisherwomen on processing, record maintenance and account keeping. A unit was set up and operationalized along with the consortium partner (Anon, 2010). In another initiative in a project funded by NFB, Hyderabad a similar approach was taken for setting up of a dry fish based unit at Pullani, Angamaly, Ernakulam (Anon., 2012). In another project being funded by DST, the fishers of Perumbalam village in Cherthala, Alappuzha are being clustered to hygienically process clam resources harvested from the area. This again aims at centralizing the now dispersed and time consuming home based activity into a more organised, technologically improved and hygienic activity.



Stakeholders Meeting at village



Training at CIFT

In another successful case, a women entrepreneur Smt. Omana Muraleedharan who runs Charis Food products, Aroor, Kerala, is a graduated incubate from the ABI of the Institute. Her idea of a prawn flavoured snack was perfected in the Institute and based and the Institute helped her in branding the product ('Prawnoes') which was registered for trademark protection by ZTM-BPD Unit. Three extruded products were developed and standardized 'Spicy Shrimp', 'Shrimp n Onion' and 'Prawn Seasoning' and is the first ever Prawn Flavored Ready-to-eat Snack Food. The entrepreneur is marketing the product successfully.

From various studies it is clear that for resource poor fisherwomen group based approaches are more viable and practical. Proper capacity building, technical and credit support and handholding for marketing are important aspects to be taken care of to make the enterprises sustain.

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