

Challenges and Constraints Faced by Fisherwomen in Kashmir: A Comprehensive Examination

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to shed light on the social, economic, personal, and health-related issues faced by the fisherwomen of the Kashmir Valley. Fisheries play a significant role in the food production process by providing the population's dietary protein demands and boosting the market. Even though they make up around half of Jammu & Kashmir's population, women are heavily involved in the fishing industry. They continue to be among the poorest in the state's most vulnerable categories, nonetheless. Fisherwomen are a vital component of post-harvest handling and marketing of fish products, serving as a vital link between producers and consumers. However, they face challenges due to increased competition, dwindling resources, and complex working conditions. Limited mobility further complicates their work, highlighting the need for capacity-building sessions and workshops to enhance their skills and generate additional income for their families. Encouraging women entrepreneurs in the fisheries sector is also essential. Addressing the various challenges to empower fisherwomen requires serious consideration by the State Government when formulating new development strategies.

Keywords: Fisherwomen, Kashmir, Vulnerable Group, Environment

Introduction

Fishing, an ancient occupation, offers immediate sustenance with minimal delay between effort and results. In the economy of Jammu & Kashmir, fisheries have seen consistent growth over recent decades, providing a crucial source of protein and essential nutrients to all segments of the population. The Union Territory (U.T.) of Jammu and Kashmir is endowed with abundant water resources, including rivers, canals, reservoirs, tanks, ponds, floodplains, and derelict water bodies (Ahmed, 2013). Kashmir, renowned for its freshwater, particularly in the cold water sector, boasts lakes and wetlands celebrated for their unique flora and fauna. Despite abundant water resources, the region faces challenges such as siltation in rivers leading to recurrent floods. While Jammu & Kashmir contributes a mere 0.48% to the total freshwater fish production, it accounts for 31% of the country's cold water fish production (Qayoom and Bhat, 2015). However, low fish production is attributed to unscientific culture practices, lack of technical expertise, and underutilization of water bodies. Pollution, siltation, and unscientific cultural practices further contribute to declining fisheries. Understanding the fishing process is crucial for effective fisheries management, yet there is often a lack of in-depth understanding. Fishers, both men and women, encounter various constraints, with studies mainly focusing on men (DADH&F, 2019; Malik, Abubakr, Bhat, 2017). Few studies have examined the challenges faced by fisherwomen in Kashmir, highlighting the need to explore these constraints through a gender lens. Therefore, this study aims to uncover and analyze the constraints faced by fisherwomen in Kashmir.

Conceptual Framework

Fisherwomen, known locally as Gadhi-wajni in Kashmiri, maintain a significant and enduring presence as entrepreneurs in Kashmir, despite the wave of modernization. They possess a unique identity, often adorned in traditional attire such as the embroidered 'phiran', accompanied by large earrings and headgear. The participation of women in fishing is closely tied to the socio-economic circumstances of their households (Dehadrai, 2002). Apart from their role in selling fish, fisherwomen fulfill vital duties as homemakers, enabling men to pursue other livelihood activities. Responsibilities like cooking, childcare, children's education, family health, and sanitation are primarily managed by fisherwomen (Qureshi, Krishnan, Wani, Sivaramane, Sundaramoorthy, 2017). Many fisherwomen are also actively engaged in post-harvest fisheries tasks, such as preserving products through methods like fish drying, salting, and smoking over several days. Consequently, they market the dried or smoked fish, often fetching favorable prices (Farooqi, Rasool, Simnani, 2018). While women directly participate in activities like cleaning, fish trading, and creating value-added products in the fisheries sector, their indirect contributions extend to decision-making, financial management, and ensuring the welfare of their families.

Origin of Hanjis

The Kashmiri boatman is called Ha'enz in local dialect and Hanji in Hindi script. Kishtiban (Boatman) is another name for them. Jalbashi is a type of Jalbashi (Water-dweller). Among the Hanjis are Kashmir Valley's indigenous people and are the Valley's most prominent tribe. The first is Kalhana's 'Rajatarangani' from 826 BC (Bhat, Balkhi, Manzoor, Ali, 2018). The Kashmir valley has a historical record. Hanjis are regarded to be the most powerful people in Kashmir's history, descendants of the 'Nishada' tribe, either kin or relatives or contemporaries of the 'Naga Race,' who were described as the place's top chieftains in their narrative. This indicates that these People (Hanjis) were among the valley's first residents. They make a living out of the lake by working as water transporters, fishers, vegetable farmers, woodcutters, grain carriers, building material merchants, collectors of various lake goods, paying guest keepers, and tourist guides, among other things (DOF, 2019). The Hanji are strong, hardworking people who have mastered the skill of life on water and are familiar with the true depths and mysteries of lakes and rivers. (DCFR, 2020)

Hanji activities have had an impact on the Dal lake, resulting in a dense mushrooming of communities around the lake. Both permanent and mobile settlements are mushrooming around Dal Lake. These communities are mostly occupied by Hanjis for residential purposes and as their population has grown, these settlements have expanded and become denser. Currently, Dal Lake shelters over 50 hamlets with a population of over 50,000 people who own property rights on 300 ha (6,000 kanals) of agricultural land and 670 ha (13,400 kanals) of lake water area. Furthermore, a huge number of hotels, guest houses, and other commercial and residential structures in and around the area, residences and restaurants have sprung up around the lake. All of this has a direct and indirect impact on the ecology of the Dal Lake. Furthermore, the proliferation of settlements has blocked smaller canals that were once utilised to connect various water bodies in the watershed as well as distribute and circulate water. The Nallah Mar canal, for

example, used to connect Dal Lake with Aanchar Lake in the north western side of Srinagar city, although there is a high population of Hanjis here.

Objectives

The Study has the following objectives.

1. To study social, economic, personal, health care and other challenges faced by fisherwomen
2. To provide suggestions for their rehabilitation and upliftment and empowerment.

Methodology

This is an exploratory and descriptive research where we have used both primary as well as secondary techniques of data. Primary data will be collected through case studies. The population for the present study consists of fisher women from the valley of Kashmir Valley. The most famous lakes in Kashmir are Wular, Dal, Manasbal, Gilasar, Ahansar, Waskur, and Nigeen. Among these, Wular, Dal, and Manasbal lakes are more critical in terms of providing fisheries livelihood and tourism opportunities. These lakes are selected for the study as Wular is the largest freshwater lake of India, Dal lake is vital from a tourism point of view, and Manasbal lake is the deepest lake in India, known for its fish and lotus stem (Nelumbo). Besides, most of the license holders depend on these lakes for their livelihood. Fishing households dependent on Wular, Dal and Manasbal lake were the sampling unit for the study. Villages near these lakes were selected based on the highest number of license holder fishers as per the list provided by the Department of Fisheries (DoF) as well as field visits. The households were selected randomly from each village and from each household; information was collected from fisher men and fisher women using an interview schedule.

Finding and Discussion

Case Study: One of the respondents, Zooni(name changed) , a Kashmiri fisherwoman in her late 60s, started out traversing the streets with a bucket full of fish on her head. Her father enlisted her at the age of 13 in the business that would become her sole source of income for the rest of her life. Zooni , who lives on a Fisher man colony near Dal Lake, one of Kashmir's most famous bodies of water, claims that catching fish and selling it to visitors has been her family's primary source of income for centuries. "I knew I was going to sell fish since I was a kid." That is something that everyone in our family does. "All of our requirements were met by the lake where we dwell," she explains. Her family is from a Kashmiri tribe known as the 'Hanjis,' who live in houseboats and make a living off the region's abundant lakes and rivers. The majority of the tribe's members work in tourism, transporting tourists in lavishly decorated boats known as 'Shikaras' to see the sights of the rivers and lakes. Others in the tribe catch and sell fish to the general public. Zooni is a member of the later group. The men put nets into the lake early in the morning, capture fish, and pass the stock on to their women, who sell it by walking around in different regions. I was hesitant to join my father when he offered, but there was no other way for us to make a livelihood. "Selling fish gradually became a part of my life, and thus the family legacy continued.



A list of constraints faced by fisher women was prepared after preliminary interactions with key informants, pilot study, and literature review. Based on the list, constraints were categorized and they are categorized below:

1. **Social Challenges:** In Kashmir, fisherwomen typically fulfill roles either as homemakers or as earners through fishing activities. They have identified several social issues, including dowry demands, inadequate healthcare, low literacy rates among children, and a lack of cooperation among fishermen and fisherwomen. Moreover, women engaged in fish selling encounter difficulties such as fluctuating market prices, unhygienic market conditions, and a lack of basic amenities. Establishing a voluntary organization for fisherwomen could be an effective means of addressing these social challenges.

2. **Psycho-social Constraints:** Anxiety stemming from disturbances and stress due to long working hours are significant psycho-social challenges faced by both fisher men and fisherwomen in Kashmir. Among these, anxiety resulting from disturbances is a major concern for both groups. The region's prolonged history of disturbances has had adverse effects on the population. Fisherwomen report difficulties in selling fish during times of unrest, even if the fish have been caught by fishermen. This disruption in regular income and livelihood leads to anxiety and depression. Similar observations have been made in other studies, highlighting the impact of political unrest and conflict on the mental health and income of Kashmiri residents. Additionally, the long working hours, especially during fishing seasons, have negative effects on the health of fisherwomen. These findings align with previous studies documenting ergonomic challenges faced by women engaged in seafood processing.
3. **Economic Challenges:** The primary economic issue highlighted by most respondents is inadequate income, exacerbated by the lack of alternative employment opportunities. This financial strain often forces fisherwomen to borrow money, leading to a cycle of indebtedness. They also face challenges such as low prices for their products and a lack of assured markets, compelling them to sell their goods locally due to the absence of proper marketing channels.
4. **Household Challenges:** Fisherwomen in the Kashmir Valley encounter various household problems, including unemployment, school dropouts among children, difficulties in finding suitable matrimonial alliances, and underemployment. Additionally, family disputes and debt are common issues faced by these women. It is evident that if fisherwomen could contribute more significantly to family income, many of these problems could be mitigated.
5. **Education-Related Challenges:** Low literacy levels among fisherwomen and their children pose significant challenges, limiting their bargaining power in the market and affecting their ability to secure fair prices for their products.
6. **Health-Related Challenges:** The physical demands of carrying heavy loads of fish daily, often weighing between 35-40 kgs, lead to health problems, particularly back issues, among fisherwomen. They are also susceptible to ailments such as diarrhoea, fever, vitamin deficiencies, depression, hypertension, and diabetes, which are exacerbated by their demanding work conditions.
7. **Cold Weather Constraints:** Fishing and marketing activities are significantly hampered by cold weather conditions, including fishing in freezing temperatures, snow, and windy conditions, as well as selling fish in cold and snowy weather. Prolonged exposure to bone-chilling winds and freezing temperatures can result in various cold-related injuries and illnesses among fisherfolk.
8. **Political Constraints:** Both fisher men and fisher women identify political constraints such as curfews, bandhs, and heavy security force deployment as significant challenges.

Periodic cycles of protests and public unrest in Kashmir directly impact the livelihoods of fisherfolk, as fishing activities are halted during such times, leading to income losses. Additionally, the urban areas where fisherwomen sell their catch often become hotspots of unrest, further limiting their ability to sell their products. The region's political instability and conflict have resulted in heavy economic losses over the years.

Suggestions

Future prospects for the empowerment of fisherwomen require addressing various social, psychological, institutional, and economic challenges through the formulation of new development strategies. Researchers must focus on identifying the specific needs of fisherwomen and developing technologies tailored to their requirements. Financial institutions, including State Finance Corporations, should launch assistance programs specifically targeting women fishers. Additionally, the State Government should implement various development schemes aimed at enhancing the socio-economic status of fisherwomen.

Providing training on the hygienic handling of fish is crucial for improving quality and sanitation, thus enhancing marketing opportunities. Training programs should cover proper fish handling, processing, hygiene, and sanitation practices to ensure compliance with food safety standards. Moreover, training in scientific methods of smoking and drying fish can improve product quality and market value. Fisherwomen can also benefit from training in alternative fish processing methods, such as preparing fish fingers, cutlets, balls, samosas, pakoras, and pickles, to diversify their income sources and improve economic conditions.

Areas of training should prioritize product marketability and profitability. Cooperatives have proven successful in empowering women farmers and addressing gender inequality in other states of India. Establishing women-only cooperatives in different districts of the Valley can serve as important tools for empowering and educating fisherwomen, providing partnership, solidarity, and resources for their economic advancement. Urgent action is needed to establish such cooperatives to enable and empower fisherwomen effectively.

Empowering fisherwomen in Kashmir requires a multifaceted approach that addresses their unique socio-economic challenges and leverages their strengths and potential. Here are some suggestions for empowering fisherwomen in Kashmir:

1. Access to Education and Skill Development:

- Provide opportunities for fisherwomen to access formal education and skill development programs, including vocational training in fishing techniques, marketing, and entrepreneurship.
- Offer literacy and numeracy programs tailored to the needs of fisherwomen, enabling them to make informed decisions and engage more effectively in economic activities.

2. Enhancing Access to Resources:

- Ensure equitable access to resources such as fishing equipment, boats, and infrastructure, including safe landing sites and storage facilities.

- Facilitate access to credit and financial services, including microfinance initiatives, to enable fisherwomen to invest in their businesses and improve their livelihoods.
3. **Supporting Collective Action:**
 - Encourage the formation of women's cooperatives or self-help groups among fisherwomen, providing a platform for collective bargaining, resource pooling, and mutual support.
 - Offer training and capacity-building support to strengthen the organizational and management skills of fisherwomen's groups, enabling them to effectively advocate for their rights and interests.
 4. **Promoting Market Linkages:**
 - Facilitate market linkages for fisherwomen, including access to local markets, fish processing facilities, and value-added products.
 - Provide support for the development of branding and marketing initiatives to promote locally sourced and sustainably harvested fish products.
 5. **Ensuring Legal and Social Protection:**
 - Raise awareness among fisherwomen about their legal rights, including land tenure, access to natural resources, and protection from gender-based violence.
 - Advocate for the implementation and enforcement of laws and policies that promote gender equality and the rights of fisherwomen, including access to social welfare schemes and entitlements.
 6. **Promoting Sustainable Fishing Practices:**
 - Promote sustainable fishing practices that prioritize conservation and resource management, ensuring the long-term viability of fisheries and livelihoods for fisherwomen.
 - Provide training and technical assistance on sustainable fishing methods, habitat restoration, and ecosystem conservation.
 7. **Engaging with Stakeholders:**
 - Foster dialogue and collaboration between fisherwomen, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to address the specific needs and challenges facing fisherwomen in Kashmir.
 - Encourage the participation of fisherwomen in decision-making processes related to fisheries management, resource allocation, and development planning.
 8. **Building Resilience to Climate Change:**
 - Support fisherwomen in adapting to the impacts of climate change, including changes in fish stocks, weather patterns, and natural disasters.
 - Provide training on climate-smart practices, disaster preparedness, and alternative livelihood options to enhance the resilience of fisherwomen and their communities.

By implementing these suggestions in a coordinated manner, stakeholders can contribute to the empowerment of fisherwomen in Kashmir, enabling them to realize their full potential and improve their socio-economic well-being.

Conclusion

The Constitution of India guarantees women's rights, including equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination. Women are recognized as a crucial human resource in the State of Jammu & Kashmir. Empowering fisherwomen is seen as a vital avenue for the economic growth and development of this community. However, traditional societal norms and the neglect of state and relevant authorities pose significant obstacles to the development of fisherwomen in the Valley. Therefore, continuous efforts are necessary to inspire, encourage, and motivate women involved in fishing activities. Investing in the capabilities of women and empowering them to make choices not only holds intrinsic value but also serves as a key driver for economic growth and development. Achieving women's empowerment and, consequently, community development requires a holistic approach that involves the concerted efforts of both men and women. As Amartya Sen (2001) aptly observed, empowering women enhances their voice and influence, thereby reducing various forms of gender inequality and alleviating the indirect penalties that men may face due to the subjugation of women.

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