From the Pond to the Plate: Women Drive India's Fisheries — So Why Are They Still Invisible?

Priyanka Raysamant*

MSc Aquatic Environment Management | BSc Fisheries Science
Former Technical Officer, WorldFish (CGIAR) | Fisheries Development Officer,
Odisha State Fisheries Department, Field Researcher, World Bank-funded ICZM Project, Odisha

Corresponding Author
Priyanka Raysamant
Email: priyankaray52725@gmail.com

OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Women in Fisheries, Fisheries Value Chain, Literacy, Financial Autonomy, Generational Change, PMMSY, Self-Help Groups, Coastal Livelihoods, Odisha

How to cite this article:

Raysamant, P. 2026. From the Pond to the Plate: Women Drive India's Fisheries — So Why Are They Still Invisible? *Vigyan Varta* 7 (11): 207-212.

ABSTRACT

Women take part in many stages of India's fisheries value chain, especially after the catch is landed. They sort, dry, process, transport and sell fish, and they often manage household and group-based livelihood activities. Census data show that women make up most of the people engaged in fish marketing and processing in India's marine fishing villages, yet their work is not always reflected in official records, in access to services or in local decision-making. Government programmes, including the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY), offer important opportunities for women. However, women may find it hard to use them because of limited literacy and digital skills, limited say in household and community decisions, and limited control over the income they earn. A further concern is that many educated young people from fishing families are choosing other careers, so the work of the value chain is increasingly left to women with little or no schooling. Drawing on professional experience and field observations from coastal Odisha, this article discusses these four issues and suggests practical steps. It argues that support for women should go beyond training and subsidies to include literacy, financial access, ownership of assets, a voice in decisions and a future for the next generation.

INTRODUCTION:

India's fisheries sector supports the livelihoods of many people in coastal and inland communities. The Handbook on Fisheries Statistics reports about 28 million fisherfolk in the country, including fish farmers, fish workers and fishers, and around 12 million of them are women (Department of Fisheries, 2022). Much of the attention given to the sector goes to fish production and capture. But the work does not end when the fish are harvested. Fish must be sorted, cleaned, dried, processed, transported and sold, and women do a large share of this work.

The Marine Fisheries Census 2016 recorded fishing-allied activities separately for men and women. Across India's marine fishing villages, women made up about 86% of the people engaged in fish marketing and about 90% of those engaged in curing and processing. In Odisha, the figures were about 63% for marketing and 90% for curing and processing (CMFRI-FSI-DoF, 2020, Table 7; percentages calculated by the author). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that, globally, women are about 24% of fishers and fish farmers but about 62% of the post-harvest workforce (FAO, n.d.).

Despite this contribution, women's work may not always be recorded as formal employment. Research on women in small-scale fisheries has shown that much of their work is missing from official statistics (Harper et al., 2020). Women fish vendors in India also face problems such as competition from traders with more credit and capital, long journeys to reach fish landing centres, and social stigma (ICSF, 2015).

My professional work with fishing communities in Odisha has given me many chances to observe the different responsibilities women carry in the fisheries value chain. It has also made me think about the gap between the work women do and the recognition, resources and decision-making power available to them. This article looks at four connected issues: access to information and literacy, women's role in household and community decisions, women's control over the income they earn, and the future of this work as the next generation moves to other careers. The observations from the field are based on my own experience and should not be read as describing every household.

Government support for women in fisheries

Government programmes have created important opportunities for women in fisheries. The Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) supports infrastructure, training and livelihood development in the sector (Department of Fisheries, 2020). It also gives priority to women. Women beneficiaries can receive financial assistance of up to 60% of the unit cost, compared with 40% for the general category (Rajya Sabha, 2024).

In several states, women's self-help groups are also taking part in fish processing, value addition and small enterprises. Training in products such as fish pickle, fish fingers, fish cutlets and fish papad can help women add value to fish and widen their livelihood options. Access to credit and insurance can also help households and small businesses manage risks.

These initiatives are useful, but the existence of a scheme does not mean that every eligible woman can use it. In practice, women may need help to understand the eligibility rules, fill in forms, arrange documents and use online services. They may also need support within their households and communities to attend training or to use the benefits on their own. For

this reason, both programme design and field-level implementation matter.

1. Literacy and access to information

Literacy affects how easily a person can get information and use public services. The Marine Fisheries Census 2016 found that about 34% of the eligible marine fisherfolk population had never been to school, and the share was higher among women (36.2%) than among men (31.9%) (CMFRI-FSI-DoF, 2020). The census covers marine fishing villages only, but it gives a useful picture. In the communities I have worked with, some women have had fewer chances to study because of household duties, early entry into work or the distance to schools (author's field observations).

A woman who is not comfortable reading may find it difficult to understand an application form, check the details of a loan or follow instructions on a government website. Digital services can add another barrier when a person has little experience with smartphones, online banking or digital verification. In such situations, women may have to depend on a family member or another person to complete basic tasks. This can make the process slower and leave women less informed about the benefits or responsibilities involved. It can also make it harder for them to compare market prices, keep accounts or check payments.

Training programmes should therefore include practical help with reading, basic calculations, digital use and financial literacy. Information about schemes should be given in simple language and, where possible, through local meetings and demonstrations.

2. Women's work and decision-making

In many fishing households, women work every day in handling, drying, processing and selling fish, but major decisions are often taken by men. In some households I have visited, the boat, nets or pond are registered in the name of a male member, even though women contribute a great deal of the work around them (author's field observations). Decisions about whether to join a training programme, open a bank account, take a loan or start a small enterprise are also often discussed and decided by male family members. In my experience, women are also less visible in village fisheries committees, cooperatives and other local bodies. Research has shown that women's work in small-scale fisheries often goes unrecorded and is therefore easy to overlook in planning (Harper et al., 2020).

Training and group membership are a good start, but women also need a chance to share their views and influence decisions. They need opportunities to take leadership roles in self-help groups, cooperatives and fisheries institutions. Discussions that include both women and men can help address attitudes that limit women's choices.

3. Earning an income and controlling it

In the communities I have worked with, I have often seen that women earn a regular income from fish marketing, processing or related work. But during our survey and field visits, we noticed that this income is often handed over to a male family member, who is seen as the head of the family and who decides how it is used (author's field observations). In such cases, a woman may be earning enough but still not feel financially secure. She may not have personal savings, may not decide how the money is spent, and may find it hard to invest in her own work, for example by buying drying equipment or packaging material, or by paying for a food safety registration.

These observations come from my field experience and should not be read as describing every household. Many families

take financial decisions together. Still, the pattern was seen often enough to deserve attention. Programmes that aim to empower women should not only help them earn. They should also help them keep a say over what they earn. Where possible, benefits, subsidies and group savings should reach women through bank accounts in their own names, and financial literacy training should help women manage these accounts with confidence.

4. The next generation and the future of the work

Another change I have noticed in fishing communities is about the next generation. Many children of fishing families are now getting a good education, which is a very positive development. But many of them are not interested in continuing the work their families have done for generations, such as handling, drying, processing and selling fish, and they prefer to look for other kinds of work (author's field observations). I have not measured this in a formal study, and it would be useful to examine it more closely.

As a result, the work of the value chain is increasingly carried on by women who have had little or no schooling. These are the same women who, as discussed above, may find it hardest to read forms, use digital services or keep control of their income. This does not mean that educated young people are to blame. There may be many reasons for their choices. Fish handling and selling is hard physical work, and women vendors in particular can face social stigma (ICSF, 2015).

This trend matters for three reasons. First, traditional skills in drying, curing, preserving and selling fish are mostly learned by doing. If younger people do not learn them, this knowledge may be lost. Second, educated young people could bring new skills such as record keeping, digital tools, packaging and marketing, but these skills may not reach the value chain if they work elsewhere. Third, if fewer young people join, the workforce may become older over time, and the women who remain may carry a heavier load with fewer resources.

What can be done

Combine training with literacy. Training programmes for women should include simple support for reading, basic calculation, digital use and financial literacy, so that women can use their new skills on their own.

Make schemes easier to reach. Information on schemes should be shared in simple local language through village meetings and demonstrations. Local facilitators, especially women, can help with forms and documents.

Give women direct financial access. Benefits, subsidies and savings should be paid into bank accounts in women's own names wherever possible, with support to help them use these accounts.

Support women's ownership. Where women are the main workers in a fish pond, drying unit or small enterprise, joint registration or a lease in the woman's name should be encouraged.

Include women in decisions. Fisheries cooperatives, village committees and self-help group federations should make space for women to speak and lead.

Work with men and families. Awareness sessions that include men and elders can help families discuss how decisions are made and how income is shared.

Make fisheries work respected and rewarding for young people. Better working conditions, cleaner and safer processing spaces, fair prices and the use of new tools can make the work more attractive. Educated young people from fishing families can also

help their mothers and sisters with accounts, digital tools and marketing.

Record and pass on traditional knowledge. Skills in drying, curing, preserving and selling fish should be recorded and shared through training programmes, so that they are not lost when older women stop working.

CONCLUSION

Women are an important part of India's fisheries value chain. Their work in handling, processing and marketing fish supports household incomes and connects producers with consumers. Yet their contribution does not always bring equal access to information, finance, assets or decision-making. At the same time, many educated young people from fishing families are moving to other careers, so the work is increasingly carried by women with little or no schooling.

Government schemes and training programmes can create opportunities, but their impact depends on whether women can reach and use the support in their everyday lives. Literacy, financial independence, ownership and representation should be treated as important parts of fisheries development, not as extra activities to be taken up later. Making fisheries work respected and rewarding will also matter if the next generation is to see a future in it.

From my experience of working with fishing communities in Odisha, I believe that recognising women's contribution must go together with strengthening their ability to make decisions about their work and livelihoods. When women have the knowledge, resources and space to take part fully, the benefits can reach beyond individual households to the wider fisheries community.

REFERENCES

CMFRI-FSI-DoF. (2020). *Marine Fisheries Census 2016 – India*. Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare; Fishery Survey of India and Department of Fisheries, Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India.

Department of Fisheries. (2020). *Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY): Operational guidelines*. Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India.

Department of Fisheries. (2022). *Handbook on fisheries statistics 2022*. Fisheries Statistics Division, Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India, New Delhi.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (n.d.). *Gender in fisheries and aquaculture*. https:// www.fao.org/gender/learning-center/ thematic -areas/gender-in-fisheries-and-aquaculture/en (accessed 31 October 2026).

Harper, S., Adshade, M., Lam, V. W. Y., Pauly, D., & Sumaila, U. R. (2020). Valuing invisible catches: Estimating the global contribution by women to small-scale marine capture fisheries production. *PLOS ONE*, 15(3), e0228912. https://doi.org/10.1371 /journal. pone. 0228912

International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). (2015). *Note on women fish vendors in India*. ICSF, India. https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/ uploads/2015/09/930.ICSF005.pdf

Rajya Sabha. (2024, August 7). *Unstarred Question No. 1816 on the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana* [Reply by the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying]. https://rsdebate.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/750844/1/PQ_265_07082024_U1816_p244_p246.pdf

Author's field observations. Observations and interactions with coastal fishing communities in Odisha, India (2011–2025), including work under the World Bank-funded Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) Project.