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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECONOMIC AND DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES OF MARITIME FISHER WOMEN OF NORTH COASTAL
ANDHRA PRADESH, EAST COAST OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In anthropological literature, the early studies, particularly of late nineteenth century anthropologists had recorded women's participation in all aspects of social, economic, political and religious aspects as they were but not emphasizing or focusing distinctly on women. In the present study the analyzed data are presented under three broad heads, such as 1. Procurement and Transport. 2. Sale of fish (wet) and 3. Dry fish and Sale. Each head is further sub headed according to the information pertaining to type of marketing or vending methods and locations. Fisher women activities at domestic level besides the economic are dealt in detail to draw the domestic and entrepreneurial tenacities.

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INTRODUCTION

Women roles can be defined as either what women do or those roles ascribed as belonging to a particular social group. In most fishing societies in the world, there is a strong sexual division of labour. Men are generally involved in fishing and spend most part of their working time at sea required that women took on economic as well as managerial roles. In such circumstances, women managed the household- processing fish, carrying them to the markets for sale, managing the finances and procuring daily necessities such as firewood, water and food stuffs (Bavinick, 2001). Schombucher (1986) notes "these two complementary spheres in economic organization (production versus trading) have led to a high degree of economic dependence among women". Such independence also accounts for the relatively high number of matrifocal families in fishing communities.

In 1970s onwards the feminist anthropologists have begun to demonstrate the women's roles in moulding the society and to combat the male bias in inquiring the facts. Women are singled out to bring in the facts not only in documenting the socioeconomic and cultural profile but also in analysing the development facets of varied societies.

Moore (1988), a feminist anthropologist has argued that though the social roles of women have long been noted, the importance of their social practices had been largely ignored.

Studies on women's roles have shown that there is analytical distinction between the productive and reproductive aspects of society. This distinction is related to the division of social life into public and private/domestic spheres. Earlier social scientists including anthropologists once believed that men engaged in the public sphere and women in reproductive roles in the domestic sphere. But, contemporary research has shown that women play a vital role in the production as well of the material and cultural goods of the society than was previously recognised. Further, the responsibility of the family is not their exclusive domain, as in some societies men spend a significant amount of their care for their children. In some societies, women care for their children as they engage in productive activities such as gathering, agriculture and horticulture (Moore 1988). Davis and Nadel-Klein (1997) have edited a book "To work and To Weep: Women in fishing economies" covering a review of the literature on women in fishing. They have identified three main approaches to studying gender issues which are 'the land-sea division', the production and reproduction' and 'multiple roles'. Davis and Nadel-Klein (1997) commented with regard to women, that 'while their men are at sea, women must become reluctant matriarchies',

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when their men are at home, women must throw into dutiful wives’.

The second approach, ‘production and reproduction’, focuses on the gender division of labour. As fishermen go to sea, they depend on women perform various types of works, both social and economic. In contrast to the above mentioned two approaches, the third approach, ‘multiple roles’ avoid making broad generalizations. In this approach, women do not go for fishing but they are involved in multiple roles, selling the catch, household works, etc.

The literature on the role of women in fishing is scanty. Studies have stated that women’s contribution includes community work (culture, kin organizations), household work (taking care of the family unit), individual care and being involved in fishing economies (processing and marketing). At community and household levels, the roles which women play in establishing the family and developing kinship within which communities are often underrated (Jentoft 1999). According to Nadel-Klein and Davis (1988), kinship is the basis of economic cooperation and social structure. Women’s non-monetary work within the household and community also support and strengthen community cohesiveness (Norr and Norr 1997). The roles of fisher women are very significant to the livelihood strategies.

In a research article ‘gender, culture and the sea: contemporary theoretical approaches’ Davis Dona Lee and Jane Nadel-Klein (1997) have delineated the meaning of gender and anthropology. According to them ‘sex’ normally refers to a category assigned a person on the basis of physical phenotypic genital apparatus and conveys, at least to westerners, an essential or irreducible ‘base’. Gender on the other hand, entails the socio cultural construction and interpretation of masculinity and femininity. Further, this paper provides comprehensive information on gender in maritime anthropology literature. They have suggested that understanding of local fisheries can be greatly enhanced by re-examining the role of gender in fishing communities. They conclude that ‘it is important for further maritime research to pursue a gender, rather than a ‘add women and stir’ approach. In the book “women of the Praia” Cole (1991) has presented a detailed ethnography on the work and lives of women in a rural fishing community on the north coast of Portugal. She has shown that in the past, the fisher women enjoyed greater autonomy in work and social relations than do their daughters and grand daughters, who live in a context of increasing commoditization and industrialization. Norr and Norr (1997) have focused on the status of the women of Minakuppam, a small hamlet located near Chennai (Madras) city. In their study they brought out the women’s economic activities, family life and daily activities, leisure and friends, marriage and kinship networks. According to this study the local women are more active and limited to their social activities. Further, they have shown that the fisher women have more power than women in farming villages.

Kalpana Ram (1994), a social anthropologist, explores the ambiguities and complexities of caste, religion, class and gender in the Catholic fishing community of Mukkuvar of

Tamil Nadu, India. She explains the participation of Mukkuvar men and women in the construction of a culture that can not classify catholic or Hindu, peasant or proletarian. She draws on Marxist feminist and anthropological methodologies in analysis and delineates the issues of gender and migration, capitalist development, goddess worship and learning.

Medard (2002) explained the analysis of gender roles of women in Lake Victoria. She has identified three important women roles such as fishing, processing and marketing. She has also discussed about the impact of gender roles both in promoting and hindering the women involvement in fisheries research, development and management. Margaret Chapman (1987) in her research paper on ‘Women’s Fishing in Oceania’ identified a few quantitative data available on women involvement in fishing, and summarised differences in men’s and women’s fishing methods, besides suggesting some policy implications. According to her study women’s fishing is more secular than men in Oceania.

An Indo-Norwegian pilot project on Kerala Fisheries, Klausen (2001) had identified differential impacts on the Catholic and Hindu communities. The study lamented that catholic fishers got more benefits than the Hindu. The study has projected twin factors of receptiveness and education of fishers, where the Catholics are proactive in these factors than the Hindus. In a recent article Sushmita Patnaik *et al.* (2011) have described various problems of the fisher women in the areas of marketing, income, indebtedness, healthcare, etc. Their study deals with the socio-cultural life of fisher women in Orissa state identified a few critical issues that are leading to impoverishment of women and suggested a few policy implications for their development.

A report entitled “The Potential Technical and Economic Role of Women in Fisheries, their role in Small-scale Fisheries of the Bay of Bengal” Yap (1980) presents the role of fisher women in fisheries and fish related activities. The report concludes that since fishing activity requires physical strength and stamina only a few women participate in fishing but as wives they extend economic support. Gulati (1984) had studied three fishing villages, such as Sarthikulanganara, Neendukara and Puthenthura located in Kerala state. Her study has revealed differential impacts of mechanization in the context of the introduction of mechanization in navigation and fishing. She applied case study, interview and observation methods of enquiry and delineated the changes in work participation and women’s demographic behaviour. The study identified more economic inequalities among fishers of Sakthikulanganara than in Needakara and Puthenthura due to ownership of mechanized boats. Inequality in economic development has led to intra-village and inter-village tensions also. She further observes that there is decline in the number of traditional crafts operated by the fishermen.

An article published in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) entitled “The Fisher Woman Financier: A study of Status-Role Nexus in a Peasant Community” Sridevi (1989) had identified the role of Marakathe, the fisherwomen financier, her institutionalized economic and social roles. She critically examined the Marakathe’s economic role and managerial skills

and identified increased female individualism and self-confidence, but without making any contribution to the development of female consciousness. Sridevi's doctoral work is a pioneering anthropological study on fisher women in Andhra Pradesh, wherein she described aspects of socialization and life-cycles, child care, financial and business transactions and such related issues of Jalari community people.

Hapke (2001) explored the impact of economic transformation with regard to development, gender and household survival in a Kerala village. He considered the 'household survival strategy' to understand the impact of economic transformation on fishing communities. Holly has discussed the impact of mechanization of marine fishing and commercialization of marketing processes and their implication on women fish vendors. Women participation in the fisheries industry in coastal India brought out by Ramachandra Ramachandra and Aruna Rao (2003) have calculated the women's participation in the fisheries industry in India. They are of the opinion that there has been a marginal increase in contribution to family income and decision making at family level for those who are working in fisheries departments. Though there is a change in income levels and decision making they are not departed from traditional patterns, thereby their living conditions and literary levels are not changed. As per their study the mechanised way of fishing, entry of bulk buyers and urban men in the traditional market affected their share in the fish trade.

In a study Syda Rao (2009) have described the status of fisher women in Andhra Pradesh. They have selected Muvvalarevu, a fishermen village in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh and applied participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), interview schedule, observation techniques in their study. The study reveals that 60 per cent of the women are involved in fish marketing and fish drying. They are of the opinion that fisher women make decisions in fish vending and household management. They pointed out work related problems like lack of work during lean season, physical strain in carrying fish to the selling points, lack of credit facility, exploitation of middlemen etc.

Lina Samuel (2007) documents the 'lived experience' of 51 fisher women and their families in the fishing economy of Kerala state, India. Her study covers work and daily activities, income, expenses and debts, and multiple roles of fisher women. In conclusion, she delineates gender roles in fishing community continue to place responsibilities for family and home on the shoulders. Women's duties in the home such as raising children, preparing meals, cleaning and attending to the elders have been continuing despite their economic roles as fish processors and vendors. The ideology of female dependence on the male earnings remains strong, traditional ideas and ideals about women within the family and society continue in spite of their changing roles in the market economy.

Objectives of the study

1. To examining conditions and role of marine fisher women of Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh.
2. To study socio- economic conditions marine fisher women.

3. To study the pace of change in fisher women community and also finds out with significant implications of social and culture changes in fisher women society.
4. To study the women roles in changing fishing activity etc.

Methodology

A sample of about 135 fisherwomen is selected and collected data on the socio-economic and cultural profile of fishing communities (Jalari and Vadabalija) of the study area. Data are collected through predesigned schedule while collecting face-to-face interview. A few well informed women households are intensively questioned to draw in-depth information (case studies). The collected empirical data is analyzed and used as value addition to the observed socio-cultural and economic factors prevailing among the Visakhapatnam fishing communities. The field observations indicate three stages of economic activities in traditional fish vending: 1. Procurement and Transport, and 2. Sale of fish (wet) and 3. Dry fish and Sale. In selling the fish is also of three different methods such as i. Street vending, ii. Street-side vending, and iii. Market vending. 4. Drying Fish and Sale. 5 Fish as Poultry Feed.

Their active and dominate behaviour is also studied and discussed in the present study as Domestic Activities and it is further categorised into i: Cooking and Collection of Firewood. ii. Cleaning and Washing. iii. Leisure Activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Activities

Since fisher women are not involved in fishing at sea they have to depend on the catch of the male persons, could it be consanguineous (husband, son, etc.) or affinal relative or crew members of the fish harvest. When men bring the catch onto the shore the process of fish trade commences. It is at the shore or beach or port or jetty or harbour the fish in bulk are traded for wholesale prices. This whole episode takes place two times a day during fishing season, the first one at morning between 7.00 and 8.00 am while evening between 3.00 and 4.00 pm. During this time fish landing places are busy with traders as well as buyers. Fisher women of the nearby habitations of fish landing places assemble to buy the fish. The large and quality fish are first subjected to auction and is mostly traded by the non-fishermen. Such fish are processed immediately and kept in cold storage for export (to neighbouring states like West Bengal and Kerala). The remaining catch is auctioned in basketfuls and goes to local traditional markets.

Procurement and Transport of Fish

Procurement of fish takes place at source, the source being the fish landing places. There are 96 fish landing places in the study area. The catch of 191 habitations/villages would land at these places. These places are located along the coast particularly at safe anchoring locales like sandy beaches, jetties and harbours fish landing places are crucial in marine fish trade, as the fish resource from the vast sea is transformed on to the land through these points only. Fisher women belong to nearby habitations of the respective fish landing place arrive

with their traditional baskets or bowls assemble and wait till the arrival of the boats/trawlers. Soon after their arrival the catch (fish) is partitioned according to the number of shares (boat, net and crew members shares) or auctioned in bulk. Those who ever succeeded in auction, which depends on the type, quality of fish and capital, carry the fish in baskets or bowls. Since the fish is most perishable the fisher women add ice, which again depends on the distance between the fish landing place and the market. Those women whose market is far away add ice which is available in nearby fish landing place (a satellite cottage activity to fisheries). Soon after mixing the ice they rush into the auto-riksha (three wheeler), which they keep for immediate transport to their market destinations. Field observations indicate a network of understandings among the fisher women, ice supplier and the auto driver, in terms of the cost and hire according to the catch. There would not be any bargain in spending time, only understandings according to the market (catch) in order to save time. At this juncture time is crucial in nexus of 'ice-fish-auto' as the ice (otherwise melts), fish (perishes) and auto (looses customers). The fish procured at different landing places along the sea coast is transported mostly on hired auto-rikshas or mini vans, and is invariably carried out by fisher women only. Fisher women carry fish to different village markets such as Ankapalli, Chodavaram, Narsipatnam, Sabbavaram, etc towns or villages located between the coast and the foothills of the Easter Ghats. Several types of fish are harvested in the study area. Catch of fish depends on the season and weather conditions. About 132 varieties of fish belong to 22 groups are harvested in the sea waters of the NECAP region.

Sale of Fish

At traditional level fisher women take up both wet and dry fish vending. They sell the fish (including prawn, crabs, squids etc.) in three different ways and methods such as i. street vending, ii. street side vending and iii. market vending.

i. Street Hawking

A few fisher women carry little loads of fish for vending along the streets. The utter with high pitch voice '*chepale-chepale* or *royyale-royyale*' (fish-fish or prawn-prawn). Most of these women are aged and weak. Interview with them has indicated that they are not regular street hawkers, but they vend only when there is surplus at catch level. During peak seasons of the harvest, auspicious or on festive days particularly during October-November months (*kartika masam*) they take up street hawking.

ii. Street side Vending

In moderately sized villages, fish vending takes place along the street side on a particular street. There is no specific infrastructure or any facility provided by the local *panchayats* or municipalities for fish vending. Vending takes place during morning (7.00-9.00 am) and evening (4.00-6.00 pm) hours. Fisher women assemble at such street-sides along with their respective basketful fish and other vending paraphernalia (utensils, knives, wooden boards and blocks) for fish scaling and cutting. No fixed price or price boards, entire sales are at

individual level on mutual acceptance. The prices are fluctuating and they depend on supply-demand nexus. Fish are logged into considerable heaps on type and size-wise, while the bigger ones are cut into sizable pieces and are logged into heaps on wooden board over the basket for sale. Shelling of the prawns and scaling of the fish generally rendered free but in a few cases a marginal amounts are demanded. Regular customers are not generally charged. Customer-vendor relationships are the root cause for rendering the free service in shelling and scaling the fish.

iii. Market Vending

In towns and big villages the fish vending takes place in market yards specifically provided by the local governments. Fixed space and platform are allotted to persons at individual level for vending fish. These market yards are with a name and they are provided with some sanitary and drainage facilities for maintaining hygienic conditions. Here too prices are not fixed but not as fluctuating as they are in street-side vending. Vending is done both on ratios (logged heaps) and weighing. Though most of the fisher women vendors are illiterate their experience sharpened their commonsense and logic, and able to tackle the business in weighing the fish in units (kilos). Fish are marketed throughout the business hours as there is a provision for storage. In this type of vending other family members of the fisher woman participate occasionally.

During the process of fish procurement and vending a clear sharing of work load among the members of a family (mother, daughter and daughter-in-law) are noticed. The data indicates that out of the 135 households married account for 68%, widows 25%, while the remaining are unmarried (4.5%) and disserted or divorced (2.5%). Most of the fish vending women are aged between 26 and 55 years (82.96%), above 55 years 14.81% and the remaining 2.22% are less than 25 years age group. In is interesting to note that 130 out of 135 are illiterates (96.3%) while the remaining 3.7% had elementary education. When the aged women are involved in fish vending the daughters and daughter-in-laws generally look after the domestic works.

Drying Fish and Sale

The fisher women of NECAP region dry the fish in different ways. Bulk fish is dried right on the beach sands very contiguous to the fish landing places or nearby habitation beaches. A few fisher women dry the fish at home yard within the habitation area. In few habitations cemented platforms are constructed for drying the fish but only a few fisher women are using them. An enquiry into the non-use of these indicates that the smooth cemented surface is not congenial for drying the fish as the skin of the fish will be peeled off while collecting them after dry. The dried fish is packed into the baskets or gunny bags to be transported to nearby weekly markets (shandys).

The unsold wet fish is dried either at beach or at home. A few fisher women use the cemented containers (golems) to dry the fish right on the beach while the others use large earthen pots (golems) at home base to dry the fish. Before keeping the fish

in the containers / pots the fisher women pore water and mix the salt as preservative. After a few hours fish is taken out and dried on net-spreads or mats. Such dried fish is collected in baskets or gunny bags and taken to weekly markets and sold in retail or wholesale market. It is clear from the study every piece of fish caught in the waters of Bay of Bengal by male members is converted into some useful form by the fisher women. In no form the fish is of useless. The scales, shells, fins and all other such parts of the fish are used in different ways for producing some bio-chemical products.

Fish as Poultry Feed

The spoiled fish in bulk is taken to dry fish yard located at Thimmayapalem between Bhimunipatnam and Visakhapatnam, where the fish is dried under the sun. The yard is spread over an area of 20 hectares specifically for the purpose of drying the fish. The dried fish is packed into baskets and gunny bags and transported to the poultry feed or organic manure industries.

Domestic Activities

Fisher women are often considered less subordinate to men at family level and dominate outside the family level. Their active and dominate behaviour is mostly related to their contacts outside the family in fish vending. Men, as mentioned earlier, will not involve in fish trade or vending matters. In spite of the heavy responsibilities like fish procurement, process, transport and trade, women are involved in several domestic tasks. They are cooking, washing and cleaning, fetching water, collection of firewood, taking care of children and the aged (parents and parent-in-laws) and several such allied domestic responsibilities.

i: Cooking and Collection of Firewood

Cooking is done on hearths in most of the cases. Only a few had the kerosene or gas stoves. Since their houses are small for want of space hearths are kept outside the house for cooking. It is interesting to observe that the hearths are of both static and mobile type. The static one are given temporary shelter while the mobile ones are changed direction according to the wind directions, which often change in the coastal environment. Cooking is done on firewood burning, which are locally collected by the fisher women and girl children. They have been struggling hard to procure the firewood as there is depletion of vegetation around their habitations. These people are rice-curry eaters, where rice is boiled or steam cooked while curries are either boiled or roasted/fried.

ii. Cleaning and Washing

Cleaning of the house premises, bathing the children and washing the cloths of the members of the family is attended by the women folk. Since there is compactness in the settlements and in the absence of bathing and washing rooms in the house most of these activities take place in the vicinity of the water points such as open wells, bore wells, public taps. It is observed that these are the points where communal and socialization process takes place. It is noticed that the number

of women assemble and time spent near water points decreases from open well to bore well and bore well to public tap. Advances in fetching water resources are leading to less togetherness. Washing of clothes has been a regular activity seen around the water points as there is no dhobi, washer men or laundry facility in several of the fishermen habitations.

iii. Leisure Activities

Fisher women are always busy hardly they find leisure time. If they find some leisure they spend mostly for productive activities like repairing the spoiled nets, twining the ropes, etc. Field observations indicate that they get fun time only when they are waiting for the arrival of catch at fish landing places. They chit chat and gossip or involve in picking leis.

Conclusions and Observations

Fish is the most perishable protein. The wet should be cooked as early as possible or should be dried for consumption at a later date. The technology of 'drying fish' has been in vogue since time immemorial, and that has allowed the fish to move from sea to faraway inland places. Dry fish play a vital role in the diet of inland inhabitants (peasants and tribals) as it contains protein, critical minerals and salts. The character of 'non-spoilage of once dried fish' for a long time (at least a month's duration) allowed movement of fish to farther distances. Fish drying in the study area takes at different levels: i) A part of the catch (fish) is dried on board in larger vessels (trawlers) either by hanging in rows or on deck. Such fish (half/partly-dried) is auctioned at fish landing places. Dry fish vendors (women) buy these fish takeaway either in gunny bags or baskets and dry them under sun for a day or two. ii) Spoiled fish, particularly from big boats and trawlers, is invariably dried in open air under the sun and is traded as raw material for poultry feed. iii) Unsold wet fish in daily markets is subjected to drying, wherein fisher women depending upon size of the fish remove the unwanted parts (intestine etc) or slit open the fish into two halves and keep them in salt water storage tanks (large earthen pots or cemented containers) for a day or two and then dried under the sun. iv) Dried fish is mostly traded in bulk in weekly markets located at different locales little inland to the coast (Nakkapalli, Kottavalasa, Srungavarapu Kota etc villages). v) Fish dried at or near harbours, jetties, fish landing places (open-air, beach sands, fish drying platforms etc.) or at individual houses ultimately brought to the weekly market centres for trade. Up to this point (from sea coast to inland market yards) the total process is being done exclusively by the fisher women with an exception to the drying spoiled fish for poultry feed. vi) Dry fish will go into the non-fisher women hold through auction at wholesale markets or weekly markets for onward retail vending in daily markets located in several villages and towns. In tribal areas, dry fish is marketed only through retail in weekly markets where there is no daily market, and vii) White meet in interior areas is available only in dry fish form, and is marketed on traditional trade networks over last several centuries, now this network is under threat due to invasion of the poultry industry.

Fisher women are crucial and critical in procurement of fish at fish landing places along the coast, processing them against

spoilage, transport them to various daily and weekly markets located far away from the sea coast. These women are knowledgeable on vending fish on various means and methods such as street hawking, street-side vending and market vending. Fisher women's tenacity in fish marketing besides attending to domestic duties like cooking, washing, fetching water, firewood, and taking care of children, aged people coupled with participating in critical decisions along with their spouse and spiritual matters are paramount in up keeping the age old inherited culture, thereby the social institutions and fishing economy.

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