

WOMEN GLEANERS IN KERALA, INDIA: ASSESSMENT USING THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD LENS

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Gleaning locally called '*thappippidutham*' (searching and catching) is a selective mode of fish harvest widely practiced by women small scale fishers globally. Indigenous methods and techniques are used which evolve locally but it is observed that the methods are still with low levels of technology. Along the Vembanad estuarine (one of the largest Ramsar wetland in the Southwest coast of India) belts of Kerala, gleaning is an important activity performed by women. This informal, unorganized and unrecognized fishing sector, falls outside the framework of formal recognition as a fishing activity and so keeps the women out of social security schemes by the state for fishers. This study using a Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) explores the activities and contribution of women involved in gleaning along the Vembanad estuarine system to analyse how the livelihood assets are being mobilized, how they cope with vulnerabilities, and what adaptive strategies are adopted without formal recognition or policy support. Field studies were carried out in eighteen locations across Alappuzha, Ernakulum and Kottayam Districts of Kerala using qualitative techniques such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews and field observations. The study employed qualitative techniques including focus group discussions (FGDs). Focus group discussions were conducted in 18 locations, mostly with female only groups, while a few included male participants.

Women used two major methods of gleaning, working at least for 4-6 hours submerged in water. Fishing follows the lunar cycles (locally known as '*Thakkam*'). The women mainly target on the fish species like peralspot, seabass, arius, gerres, prawn, mud crabs etc. Average catch ranges from 5-10 kg and mostly marketed in the local markets where they must give a commission of 10% to the auctioneers. Based on the value of the fish, they earn Rs 500-1500/day. They retain a small portion of the catch for household consumption. During the fishing operations they face several challenges like skin diseases, hearing issues, animal bites, otter attack, pollutants etc. Even though these vulnerabilities exist they are closely knitted social groups, and they motivate each other to do the activity. They are engaged in gleaning for the subsistence income, greater autonomy in household decision making and social interactions. The study highlights the critical gap in the fisheries policies and need for gender inclusive fisheries policies that formally recognizes these women as fishers. With the help of sustainable livelihood framework, the study contributes to the broader debates on gender, informal woks and rural livelihoods.