

INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE STRENGTH: WOMEN'S CAPABILITY EXPANSION IN KERALA'S FISHERIES ECONOMY

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Despite their critical involvement in the post-harvest fisheries sector, women in fisheries sector of Kerala remain economically and institutionally marginalized. This paper explores how collective organizing - through self-help groups, cooperatives, and community-based federations - has served as a transformative force in expanding the capabilities and economic agency of fisherwomen. Drawing on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the study analyses how these collective efforts not only enhance income generation and market participation but also improve women's freedom to lead lives they value - through greater mobility, decision-making power, and social recognition. Using a mixed-methods approach, including field-level case studies and policy analysis, the paper examines the experiences of women-led initiatives such as self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and federations like *Theeramythri* enterprises. It highlights how these platforms help mitigate structural barriers - such as gendered access to credit, technology, and institutional support - while enabling collective action that alleviates capability deprivations and fosters sustainable livelihoods.

When individual capabilities fail to develop due to socio-economic and patriarchal structures, collective action and group identity can strengthen shared capabilities and bring meaningful changes in the workspace that people have reason to value. The analysis reveals several key outcomes of collective organizing. First, membership in SHGs and cooperatives led to an increase in average monthly income, largely attributable to improved bargaining power in fish markets and collective procurement of inputs at discounted rates. Second, women reported enhanced mobility and negotiation skills: indicated active participation in price negotiations at landing sites, a sharp rise prior to collective affiliation. Third, the formation of women's groups has significantly reduced their financial dependency on informal moneylenders - and even on their husbands - by promoting regular savings practices. Through collective organizing, these groups are better positioned to access formal credit from institutions such as Matsyafed, The Society for Assistance to Fisherwomen (SAF), Primary Agricultural Credit Society (PACS) and government-supported schemes like Scheduled Castes Sub-Programme (SCSP). These savings and credit mechanisms have enabled members to mobilize working capital and make productive investments. Importantly, this collective mobilisation not only had a transformative impact through shared knowledge and peer support but also bolstered women's self-confidence, enabling them to assume leadership roles within their communities. Participants highlighted that collective forums served as platforms for voicing grievances and asserting their rights. Despite these advances, persistent structural challenges remain, women-led collectives often face gender-blind policy frameworks that limit formal recognition, limited access to infrastructure, and deep-rooted social norms - continue to restrict full expansion of women's capacities and capabilities.