

## **GENDER-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY FISHING: WOMEN'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES AND RURAL ECONOMIES**

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Community-based fishing practices offer sustainable livelihoods, strengthen social ties, and promote gender equality by empowering women in food production and resource management. This study explores Mahajaal fishing-“Maha” meaning big and “Jaal” meaning net practiced in the Maharashtra side of the Sardar Sarovar Reservoir, India. The study employed qualitative methods including Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and field observations. FGDs captured collective community perspectives, while KIIs provided expert insights into fishing techniques and gender roles. Observational data documented the fishing process and post-harvest practices. All data were manually reviewed to identify key insights related to fishing practices and gender roles. This approach allowed for a contextual understanding of how Mahajaal fishing contributes to rural livelihoods. It was found that Mahajaal is a community fishing activity which enables selective harvesting of small indigenous fish, minimizing bycatch. The two-cycle process 5:30–7:00 AM and 7:00–8:30 PM yields 2 to 20 kg of fish per operation, with peak catches in winter. Men deploy and manoeuvre the net in water; women retrieve it from shore, ensuring effective capture. About hundred women participate, in harvest and post-harvest sun drying, for which which lasts 6-8 hours. Dried fish sells at ₹100–110/kg, compared to ₹25–30/kg for fresh fish. The targeted species, *Corica soborna* (locally called as Kachki / Bhaat Macchli), is ecologically significant and nutritionally rich in protein, omega-3s, calcium, iron, and vitamin D, contributing to food and nutritional security. Recommendations include focus on strengthening market linkages to connect fishers with larger dry fish markets, improving trade and profitability. Women contribute significantly to the harvesting and drying of indigenous fish, making their role integral to community fishing practices.