

## **GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE DRIED FISH VALUE CHAINS: SCANNING THE POLICYSCAPE IN INDIA**

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The literature on women and gender studies in fisheries is replete with detailed enquiries into the role of women in fisheries economics. Yet, women's concerns are priorities that are seldom addressed in larger analyses of the political economy of fisheries. Policies and programmes continue to normalise and reinforce the asymmetric distribution of power and resources in favour of men and their activities. A gendered value chain approach can deal with this paradox by acknowledging gender norms, roles and relations and how they impact access, ownership and control of fishery resources (fishing gear, fishing grounds, and income) by women and men. More specifically, the value chain approach helps assess fisheries policies and practices from the point of view of women's rights in the fish value chain activities and services spanning fish production to marketing. Such assessment is a precursor to further analysis of the outcomes of women's participation in the fisheries value chains, especially the feminisation of low-value activities.

In this paper, we examine the fisheries policies of India by using value chain approach with a gender lens and drawing from a detailed scoping study of the dried fish sector done in the Western state of Gujarat. In India, dried fish sector mainly employs traditional knowledge and minimum skills and depends pervasively on women's labour at the extremes of the value chain. In upstream operations, they contribute to post-harvest processing like sorting, cleaning and drying. Their contribution to processing activities is usually assumed away in the commercial valuation of dried fish as a component of unpaid family labour. There is an implicit assumption that such labour has insignificant or no opportunity cost which arises from the dominant social norms that undervalue women's work as a natural extension of 'normal domestic' duties. Thus the critical labour put in by women and young girls in the fisher households to process the harvest timely to prevent it from losing market value is seldom accounted for while determining the prices and margins. Their labour at best is a concealed subsidy that can add to the bottom line of dried fish markets.

In the downstream of the value chain, women actively participate in the retail marketing of dried fish. The retail fish markets are highly competitive and dominated by women from socio-economically disadvantaged communities and households. While market participation brings them economic rewards, they operate under binding institutional constraints posed by the prevailing community gender norms about their conduct, mobility and opportunities as well as administrative commands that are blind to their specific needs and priorities. Added to these are the risks and vulnerabilities associated with the uncertain nature of fisheries activity, especially under increasingly volatile climate conditions. The empirical core of the paper is constituted by the data collected through structured and semi-structured interviews conducted with retail dried fish sellers in Veraval and small fish processors in Jafrabad (both on the Saurashtra coast) and Mundra coast (on the northern shore of the Gulf of Kutch).