
TIDES OF RESILIENCE: SOCIAL IMPACT JOURNALISM ON WOMEN FISHERFOLK IN INDIA

Mohanraj T P, Research Scholar, GLC Ernakulam

Dr. Lekshmi G R, Assistant Professor, GLC Ernakulam

Dr. Anoop K K, Assistant Professor, FFM KUFOS¹

ABSTRACT

Women Fisherfolk in India play a critical role in the fisheries value chain from pre-harvest activities to processing, marketing, and community support yet their contributions remain largely invisible in policy, media, and formal recognition. Social impact journalism that highlights these gendered experiences not only amplifies marginalized voices but also documents resilience strategies, coping responses, and collective actions of women in fishery-based livelihoods. This paper synthesizes academic research, media reporting, and journalistic projects to explore how storytelling influences social awareness, policy discourse, and community empowerment among Indian women fisherfolk.

Introduction

Women play crucial yet often overlooked roles in India's fisheries sector, particularly in postharvest activities such as fish processing, drying, gutting, packaging, and marketing, which are essential to the industry's supply chain but frequently undervalued and underpaid. In many coastal communities, women are responsible for tasks ranging from sorting and preserving fish to selling products in local markets, and in some regions they even engage in net mending, shellfish collection, and other supplementary activities that contribute to household and community livelihoods. Despite accounting for nearly half of the workforce in fisheries and aquaculture when post-harvest work is included, women's contributions receive significantly less recognition than those of men, who dominate actual capture fishing and hold most official fisherfolk identity cards and associated benefits such as welfare support and access to credit. This gendered division of labor reflects deep-rooted patriarchal norms that relegate women's work to informal and low-status categories, limiting their economic mobility and access to

¹ Research Scholar; Assistant Professor GLC Ernakulam & Assistant Professor FFM KUFOS

resources, training, and decision-making platforms.

The Structural barriers, such as exclusion from cooperatives and policy frameworks designed around male-centered fishing activities, further marginalize women, while challenges like health risks from prolonged physical labor and limited safety nets compound their vulnerabilities. To achieve a truly inclusive fisheries sector, there is an urgent need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that formally recognize women's roles, enhance their access to resources, and support their leadership and economic empowerment. This paper aims to examine the socio-economic role of women fisherfolk in India and analyze the media representation of women fisherfolk through social impact journalism and to assess the contribution of journalism in shaping public discourse and policy awareness. It aims to identify challenges faced by women fisherfolk as reflected in journalistic narratives and suggest measures for strengthening gender-sensitive journalism in the fisheries sector.

Background: Women in Indian Fisheries

Women have long been integral to India's fisheries sector, contributing heavily to the industry's post-harvest operations, yet their roles have often been overlooked in formal recognition, policy, and media narratives. In both marine and inland contexts, women are deeply involved in activities such as fish sorting, cleaning, drying, processing, prawn peeling, and marketing, as well as retail vending and value-added production work that is essential to moving fish from landing sites to consumers. In fact, women constitute around 47 % of marine and 44 % of inland fisherfolk, and they make up a large majority (about 86 %) of those involved in marketing within the marine sector².

In many coastal communities, women also face additional challenges stemming from environmental change, shrinking access to open spaces for processing activities, and inadequate policy support under frameworks like the "blue economy," which often emphasis capital intensive sectors over small-scale, traditional fisheries where women predominate³. These structural constraints not only limit women's economic opportunities but also hinder their ability to contribute fully to sustainable fisheries development and community resilience.

²<https://india.mongabay.com/2025/02/fisherwomen-ride-the-rough-waves-while-indias-blue-economy-blooms>

³https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286849643_Turning_the_tide_Women's_lives_in_fisheries_and_the_assault_of_capital searched on 02.02.2026

Statistical Report of Fisher Population in Kerala:

Sl No	District	Marine			
		Male	Female	Children	Total
1	Thiruvananthapuram	65833	58102	51618	175553
2	Kollam	41520	34497	20787	96804
3	Pathanamthitta	0	0	0	0
4	Alappuzha	54678	49948	29087	133713
5	Kottayam	0	0	0	0
6	Idukki	0	0	0	0
7	Ernakulam	29860	27959	17660	75479
8	Thrissur	21559	22135	14558	58252
9	Palakkad	0	0	0	0
10	Malappuram	37159	29621	26748	93528
11	Kozhikode	40571	35151	26830	102552
12	Wayanad	0	0	0	0
13	Kannur	20040	10381	8944	39365
14	Kasaragod	18249	16807	10064	45120
Total		329469	284601	206296	820366

*Government of Kerala, Department of Fisheries, District-wise Marine Fisher Population in Kerala (Marine Fisheries Statistics) (2023)⁴

Sl No	District	Inland			
		Male	Female	Children	Total
1	Kasaragod	463	543	463	1469
2	Kannur	14059	13240	8469	35768
3	Wayanad	971	842	393	2206

⁴ <https://fisheries.kerala.gov.in/ml/home-ml>

4	Kozhikode	26023	24918	13510	64451
5	Malappuram	10246	9707	5994	25947
6	Palakkad	277	277	178	732
7	Thrissur	24671	24152	17585	66408
8	Ernakulam	8243	7554	4784	20581
9	Idukki	896	887	905	2688
10	Kottayam	1881	1642	884	4407
11	Alappuzha	4347	4572	3546	12465
12	Pathanamthitta	78	84	76	238
13	Kollam	2521	2667	1425	6613
14	Thiruvananthapuram	428	408	193	1029
Total		95104	91493	58405	245002

*Government of Kerala, Department of Fisheries, District-wise Inland Fisher Population in Kerala (Inland Fisheries Statistics) (2023)⁵

Roles and Contributions of Women Fisherfolk

Women play essential roles across the fisheries value chain in India, contributing significantly to both economic activity and community wellbeing, even though their work is often undervalued in policy and recognition frameworks.

According to a global study of small-scale fisheries, an estimated 4.8 million women engage in India's small-scale fisheries, making up nearly half of the workforce and helping sustain livelihoods across coastal and inland regions.⁶ These women contribute at every stage of the value chain: about 27 % are involved in pre-harvest activities such as net-making and boatrelated work, 18 % participate in harvesting, and a significant 55 % are engaged in post-

⁵ <https://fisheries.kerala.gov.in/ml/home-ml>

⁶ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2168771®=3&lang=2> searched on 03.02.2026

harvest handling, processing, and trade tasks that are crucial for getting fish products from landing sites to consumers and local markets.

In India, women fisherfolk are central to post-harvest processing, carrying out essential work that ensures the seafood caught by fishers reaches consumers safely, retains quality, and generates income for coastal and inland communities. They are involved in sorting, cleaning, gutting, curing (drying and smoking), prawn peeling, and other processing tasks, often working long hours in both traditional settings and modern processing units. Their participation in value addition and marketing including making dried fish products, packaging, and selling fish in local markets and door-to-door connects producers to consumers and sustains household livelihoods.

In states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Odisha, and Gujarat, these women form the backbone of the local fishing economy. Their labor sustains families and communities, ensuring food security and livelihoods, especially in rural and marginalized areas⁷.

Challenges faced by Women Fisherfolk:

Women fisherfolk in India face a multitude of challenges that hinder their socio-economic development and well-being. One of the primary issues is limited access to resources such as fishing rights, credit, and land, which restricts their ability to expand their livelihoods or improve their economic status. Social discrimination and deeply rooted gender biases further marginalize them, often excluding women from decision-making processes within their communities and limiting their participation in leadership roles⁸. Environmental threats, such as climate change, rising sea levels, and unpredictable weather patterns, pose significant risks to their safety and the sustainability of their livelihoods. Additionally, women often work under hazardous conditions, with long hours and exposure to harsh weather, which jeopardizes their health. They are also vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and violence both within their communities and in workplaces, making safety a persistent concern. Despite their vital contributions to the fishing industry, these women continue to grapple with social, economic,

⁷ Jayaraman R. Production and marketing constraints of fisherwomen self-help groups in Thoothukudi District, Tamil Nadu. *Indian J Fish.* 2017 March;64(1):106-110.

⁸ Racheal, J. Johnal Gladis, and J. Fredrick. 2025. "A Study on Economic Contributions of Women Fisher Folk in Rameswaram Taluk of Ramanathapuram District, Tamil Nadu, India". *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics* 22 (7):77-83. <https://doi.org/10.9734/sajsse/2025/v22i71062>.

and environmental challenges that demand urgent attention and inclusive solutions.

Issues of Women Fisherfolk

Lack of Legal Recognition and Rights: Most women fisherfolk are not recognised as “fish workers” under fisheries laws and welfare schemes. As a result, they face limited access to identity cards, fishing rights, social security benefits, and compensation during fishing bans or disasters.

Invisible and Unrecognized Labour: Women play a crucial role in pre- and post-harvest activities such as net mending, drying, processing, sorting, and marketing of fish. However, their work is largely unpaid or undervalued and often excluded from official fisheries statistics and policy frameworks

Occupational Health and Safety Risks: Women involved in fish processing and marketing work under hazardous conditions, including prolonged exposure to sun, saltwater, cold storage, and polluted environments. This leads to health issues such as skin diseases, respiratory problems, musculoskeletal disorders, and reproductive health concerns, with poor access to healthcare.

Economic Insecurity and Low Wages: Women fisherfolk often work in the informal sector with irregular income, wage discrimination, and absence of minimum wage protection. Middlemen dominate fish markets, limiting women’s bargaining power and earnings.

Social Impact Journalism⁹

Social impact journalism in India has played a crucial role in bringing the stories of women fisherfolk out of obscurity and into public discourse, highlighting how these women contribute significantly to coastal economies yet remain largely invisible in policy and mainstream media. Through in-depth reporting and multimedia storytelling such as the Breaking the Nets series journalists have documented the daily struggles of fisherwomen, who are involved in activities from fish processing and marketing to net mending, even as they face systemic discrimination rooted in patriarchy, caste bias, and lack of official recognition.

These reports shed light on the gendered dimensions of the fishing economy, showing that

⁹ Social Impact Journalism is a form of journalism that goes beyond reporting facts and events; it aims to create awareness, influence public opinion, and bring about positive social change

nearly half of India's inland and marine fisherfolk are women and that they often lack fisherfolk ID cards and access to government support programs, which limits their ability to benefit from subsidies and safety nets.

Journalistic investigations have critically documented how policy frameworks like India's Blue Economy policy often priorities capital-intensive development ports, export infrastructure over the informal, women-led segments of fisheries. Coverage notes that only a small fraction of welfare scheme allocations benefit women and women's participation in cooperatives or decision-making bodies remains low. Reports from Mongabay India and other outlets have illustrated lived experiences from coastal hamlets such as Carca Village in Goa, where fisherwomen like Shaila D'Mello balance multiple jobs amid declining fish stocks and limited access to traditional processing spaces, portraying both economic precarity and resilience.¹⁰

Key advantages of social impact journalism

Social impact journalism has significantly influenced policy discourse around women fisherfolk in India by documenting neglected realities, amplifying marginalized voices, and bringing evidence into public and policy arenas. Award-winning multimedia reporting such as *Breaking the Nets: An Oral History of India's Fisherwomen*¹¹ has exposed the invisibility of millions of women's labour in fisheries, chronicling discrimination, economic exclusion, and struggles for recognition that rarely appear in mainstream policy discussions. This series, praised for its immersive storytelling and reach, has helped frame women's issues as not just human-interest narratives but structural concerns with policy implications, encouraging broader debate on gender equity in fisheries governance.

Journalistic investigations into India's Blue Economy policy¹² framework have highlighted how draft policies often marginalize women's contributions and overlook their employment needs, despite their centrality in post-harvest processing and coastal livelihoods. These reports question how frameworks designed to boost economic growth can remain blind to gendered exclusion, urging policymakers to integrate women's voices more meaningfully into drafting

¹⁰ <https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/2025/02/indias-fisherwomen-getting-left-behind-by-blue-economypolicies>

¹¹ <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/breaking-nets-oral-history-indias-fisherwomen>

¹² India's Blue Economy policy framework refers to the draft national policy framework on the Blue Economy developed by the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES). This draft policy aims to provide an integrated strategy for the sustainable utilization of ocean resources across economic, social and environmental dimensions. It outlines a comprehensive vision to optimize marine and coastal resources for economic growth, livelihood improvement of coastal communities, and environmental protection.

processes and implementation plans.

By presenting first-hand accounts from fisherwomen and linking them to broader policy critiques, social journalism creates a bridge between grassroots experiences and national-level discourse. This kind of reporting provides policymakers, civil society, and researchers with contextualized evidence on gaps in recognition, access to welfare schemes, and institutional representation, supporting calls for gender-inclusive policy reforms and better implementation of existing programmes. Through continuous coverage and public visibility, journalism thus shapes the narrative around fisheries policy, making women's concerns harder to ignore in debates on sustainable development, climate resilience, and economic inclusion.

The Power of Social Impact Journalism

Unlike conventional reporting, social impact journalism prioritizes change-oriented storytelling.

Its goal is not merely to inform but to inspire dialogue, accountability, and action. In the context of Women Fisherfolk, its impact is visible in several ways:

Amplification of marginalized voices: Women Fisherfolk is portrayed as narrators of their own experiences rather than passive subjects.

The Policy engagement: Investigative reports on welfare gaps and occupational hazards have prompted discussions on fisherwomen's inclusion in social security schemes.

Public sensitization: Human-centered stories cultivate empathy and challenge gender stereotypes associated with fisheries work. By adopting participatory approaches, journalists ensure ethical representation and avoid extractive storytelling.

Journalism as a Bridge to Policy Discourse

The most significant contributions of social impact journalism is its role in shaping policy discourse. By documenting gaps in the implementation of fisheries welfare schemes, journalists provide empirical insights that civil society organizations and policymakers can act upon. Media reports have contributed to demands for gender-inclusive fisheries policies, recognition of women as fish workers, and safer market infrastructure.

When journalism intersects with research and advocacy, it becomes a bridge between

grassroots realities and institutional decision-making.

Role of Judiciary in Strengthening Social Impact Journalism

The Indian judiciary has played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on environmental protection, livelihood rights, and social justice, all of which directly affect fishing communities. Although women fisherfolk are rarely addressed explicitly in judicial pronouncements, court interventions particularly through Public Interest Litigation (PIL) have significantly contributed to the recognition of their rights. In this context, social impact journalism functions as a critical intermediary between grassroots realities and judicial action, enabling courts to respond to otherwise invisible forms of marginalisation.

Judicial Reliance on Social Impact Journalism

Social impact journalism often acts as the evidentiary foundation for judicial intervention. Investigative reports, documentary evidence, and human-interest stories exposing pollution, unsafe working conditions, displacement due to coastal development, and denial of welfare benefits have frequently prompted courts to take suo motu cognisance or entertain PILs. Media documentation of women fisher folk's struggles such as lack of sanitation in fish markets, occupational health risks in post-harvest processing, and exclusion from welfare schemes helps courts understand the gendered dimensions of fisheries governance.

Judiciary, Media, and Democratic Accountability

The judiciary and social impact journalism together strengthen democratic accountability. Courts rely on the media to uncover systemic failures, while journalistic narratives gain legitimacy when acknowledged in judicial proceedings. This symbiotic relationship ensures that the concerns of women fisherfolk often excluded from formal policy-making enter legal and administrative discourse. Judicial observations referencing ground realities reported by journalists validate the role of media as a catalyst for social reform.

Judicial Recognition of Women Fisher folk Rights: Case Law Analysis

S. Jagannath v. Union of India¹³

The Supreme Court recognised that unregulated shrimp aquaculture in coastal areas causes

¹³ (1997) 2 SCC 87

severe environmental degradation and threatens the livelihoods of traditional fishing communities. By applying the principles of sustainable development and the precautionary principle, the Court prioritised the protection of coastal ecology over commercial exploitation. Although the judgment did not explicitly refer to women fisherfolk, its impact is deeply gendered. Women engaged in fish processing, drying, and vending are among the first to suffer from polluted waters, loss of access to coastal spaces, and declining fish stocks. Social impact journalism played a crucial role in bringing these realities to public attention by documenting the environmental damage and its human consequences, particularly for women in fishing communities. Through investigative reporting and community narratives, journalism transformed ecological harm into a rights-based issue, enabling judicial intervention and indirectly strengthening the livelihood and environmental rights of women fisherfolk under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action v. Union of India¹⁴

The Supreme Court firmly established the Polluter Pays Principle, holding that industries responsible for environmental pollution must bear the cost of remediation and compensation. This judgment is particularly significant for women fisherfolk, whose livelihoods depend on clean rivers, estuaries, and coastal waters for fish processing, vending, and subsistence activities. Industrial discharge and chemical pollution disproportionately affect women by reducing fish availability, contaminating processing areas, and increasing health risks. Social impact journalism has been instrumental in exposing such environmental violations and their human consequences, documenting how pollution undermines the economic security and dignity of women in fishing communities. By translating lived experiences into evidence of rights violations, journalism strengthens judicial and public recognition of environmental harm as a violation of the right to life under Article 21, thereby reinforcing the legal protection of women fisherfolk's livelihood and environmental rights.

Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India¹⁵

The Supreme Court declared the Precautionary Principle and Polluter Pays Principle as integral parts of Indian environmental law and held that environmental protection is inherent in the right to life under Article 21. This judgment is highly relevant to the rights of women

¹⁴ (1996) 3 SCC 212

¹⁵ (1996) 5 SCC 647

fisherfolk, whose livelihoods depend on unpolluted water bodies for fish processing, vending, and household food security. Environmental degradation caused by industrial effluents and unsafe practices directly reduces fish availability and exposes women to serious health and occupational risks. Social impact journalism plays a crucial role in operationalising this judgment by documenting the gendered impacts of pollution on fishing communities, particularly women, and by transforming environmental harm into a matter of constitutional concern. Through investigative reporting and community-based narratives, journalism supports judicial enforcement of environmental principles and strengthens the recognition of women fisherfolk's right to a clean environment and dignified livelihood.

Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh¹⁶

The Supreme Court held that the transfer of land in Scheduled Areas to non-tribals and private industries was unconstitutional, emphasising the protection of community-based livelihood rights and the principle of social justice. Although the case dealt with tribal land rights, its reasoning is highly relevant to the rights of women fisherfolk, whose livelihoods depend on collective access to natural resources such as coastal spaces, riverbanks, and inland waters. The judgment recognised that commercial exploitation of common resources leads to displacement and socio-economic marginalisation of vulnerable communities. Social impact journalism plays a vital role in extending the spirit of this decision to fishing communities by documenting how development projects, ports, mining, and tourism disrupt women fisherfolk's access to traditional livelihood spaces. By amplifying these ground realities, journalism transforms community displacement into a rights-based issue, reinforcing constitutional protection for women fisherfolk's livelihood, dignity, and participation in resource governance.

People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India (Right to Food Case)¹⁷

The Supreme Court interpreted the right to life under Article 21 to include the right to food and nutritional security, placing a positive obligation on the State to prevent hunger and deprivation. This judgment is particularly significant for women fisherfolk, who play a central role in household nutrition, fish distribution, and income management within fishing communities. Disruptions to fisheries livelihoods caused by environmental degradation, displacement, or market exclusion directly threaten food security for women and their families.

¹⁶ (1997) 8 SCC 191

¹⁷ W.P. (Civil) No. 196 of 2001

Social impact journalism strengthens the implementation of this judgment by documenting how livelihood loss, declining fish stocks, and inadequate welfare delivery affect the nutritional well-being of fishing households. By highlighting women fisherfolk's experiences of food insecurity and economic vulnerability, journalism translates constitutional guarantees into visible social realities, reinforcing the State's responsibility to protect the livelihood, food, and dignity of women fisherfolk.

Foundation v. Union of India¹⁸

The Supreme Court emphasised the doctrines of inter-generational equity and public trust, holding that natural resources must be protected for the benefit of present and future generations and cannot be exploited for short-term commercial gain. This judgment is highly relevant to the rights of women fisherfolk, whose livelihoods depend on sustainable coastal and marine ecosystems. Environmental degradation caused by mining, coastal development, and resource extraction disproportionately affects women engaged in fish processing, vending, and household food security. Social impact journalism plays a crucial role in advancing the spirit of this decision by exposing illegal exploitation of natural resources and documenting its long-term social consequences for fishing communities. By amplifying women fisherfolk's voices and highlighting the inter-generational impact of environmental harm, journalism strengthens public accountability and reinforces constitutional protection of women fisherfolk's livelihood, environmental, and livelihood security rights.

Bombay Hawkers' Union v. Bombay Municipal Corporation¹⁹

The Supreme Court recognised street vending as a legitimate means of livelihood protected under Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution, subject to reasonable regulation. This judgment is directly relevant to the rights of women fisherfolk, many of whom earn their livelihood as fish vendors in public markets, streets, and coastal landing centres. Evictions, harassment, and denial of vending space disproportionately affect women, threatening their economic security and dignity. Social impact journalism plays a vital role in highlighting these everyday struggles by documenting market evictions, lack of sanitation, and gender-based discrimination faced by women fish vendors. By transforming these lived experiences into issues of constitutional concern, journalism supports judicial recognition of women fisherfolk's right to carry on their

¹⁸ (2014) 6 SCC 590

¹⁹ (1985) 3 SCC 528

trade with dignity and reinforces the need for inclusive and humane regulation of public spaces.

Conclusion

Social impact journalism emerges as a vital instrument in addressing this marginalisation. By documenting ground realities and amplifying women's voices, it bridges the gap between lived experience and institutional response. Journalistic narratives have played a significant role in informing judicial intervention, shaping environmental and livelihood jurisprudence, and strengthening constitutional protections under Article 21. When combined with progressive judicial interpretation, social impact journalism transforms invisible labour into recognized rights and neglected struggles into matters of public and legal concern.

Ultimately, meaningful recognition of women fisherfolk requires sustained engagement between the media, judiciary, and policymakers. Ensuring environmental justice, livelihood security, and gender equity in the fisheries sector depends on making women's experiences central to discourse and decision-making. In this way, social impact journalism and judicial action together contribute to a more inclusive, humane, and sustainable framework for fisheries governance in India.