

*Why (and How) Fish Matters for
Women in Gujarat?
Insights from a Scoping Study*

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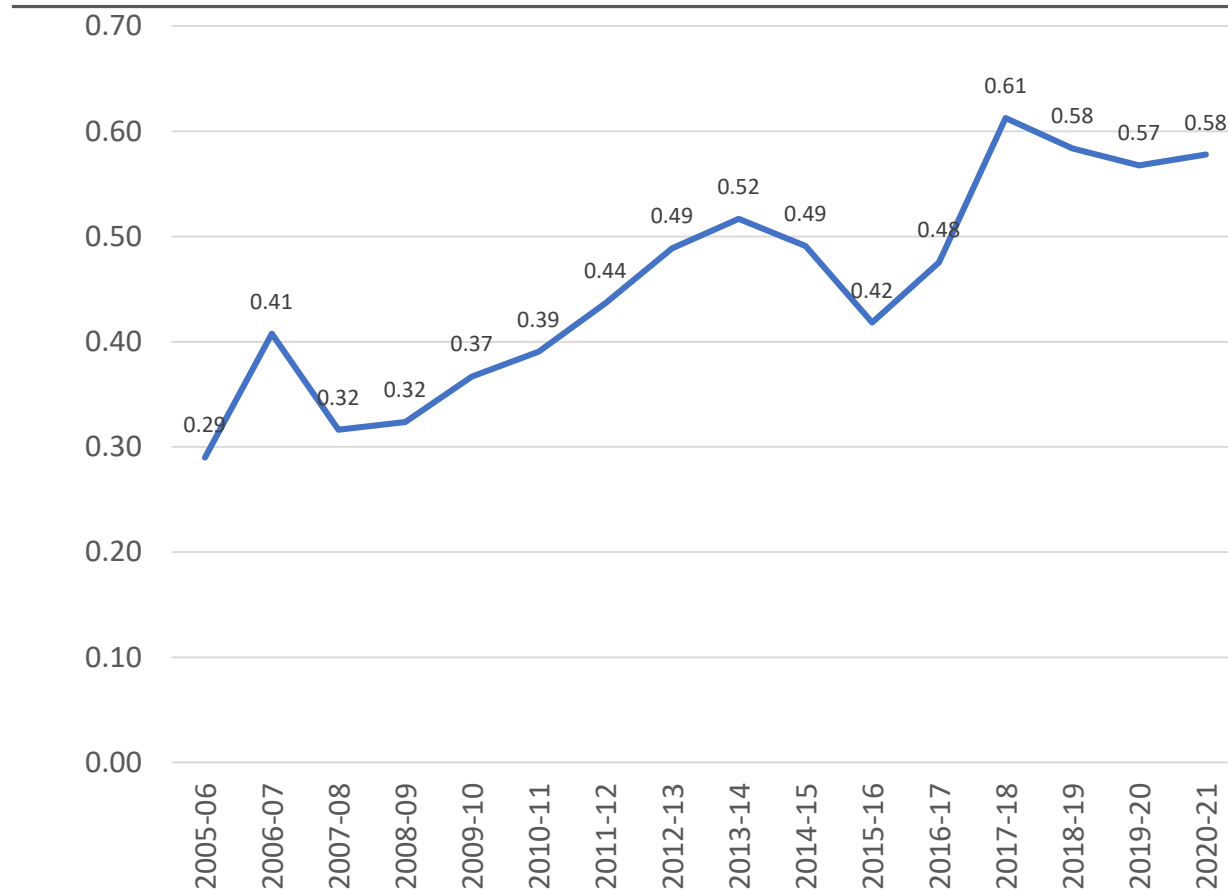


The Marine Fisheries Sector in Gujarat



- Gujarat is a prominent maritime state in terms of the length of its coastline - ~ 1600 km or about 20 per cent of the country's total coastline
- Has highly diverse fishing ecosystems; ambitious plans for port-led industrialization (\sim two thirds of industrial undertakings are along the coastline)
- Ranks first in terms marine fish production (2005-06 to 2019-20); the share in total national production marginally declined from 22 % to 19 % over the last decade
- Significant presence of industrialised fish processing
- Significant contributor to marine fish exports - about 22% of the exports from the country in 2019-20 moved through the ports in the state

Export to Production Ratio -2005/06 to 2020/21



- Fish consumption within the state is extremely low – as per the reports of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 3/4th of adult women and 2/3rd of adult men in the state have never eaten fish (IIPS and Macro International, 2007; IIPS and ICF, 2017).
- Widespread practice of vegetarianism especially among the economically and politically dominant caste elites is a major constraint to expanding retail markets even in large cities where consumption of fish is prevalent among the sizeable migrant population (Das, 2015).

Gujarat is a leading producer and exporter of dried fish

- About half of the total marine fish landings in the state get converted to dried items
- Major supplier of dried fish for domestic and international markets; Gujarat supplies dried fish to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana within and Bangladesh, China, the middle east, outside. 25 % dried fish produced in the state in 2020-21 moved to other states
- Gir Somnath district dominates dried fish production with a share of 39% in 2020-21, followed by Porbandar and Devbhumi Dwarka

The scoping study and the locale

- The scoping study was undertaken in the fishery cluster of Veraval in Gir Somnath district of Gujarat that lies on the south-western coast of the Kathiawar Peninsula on the Arabian Sea
- This is the biggest and busiest fishing harbour in the state and ~ 8,000 registered boats pass through it
- Fishers, boat owners, traders, commission agents, large, medium and small fish processing units (freezing, drying, processing), ancillary industries, knowledge and education institutions are co-located
- Kharwas constitute the dominant fishing community; significant social and economic regulation by community organisation (Johnson and Sathyapalan, 2006)





Diverse products



Objectives

1. What is the general demographic and socio-economic profile of women dried fish processors and retail traders in in Veraval?
2. How do women retail traders, a critical node in the local fish value chain, negotiate their everyday lives and work?
3. What are the distinct vulnerabilities of these women?
4. How are they impacted by the local power structures?


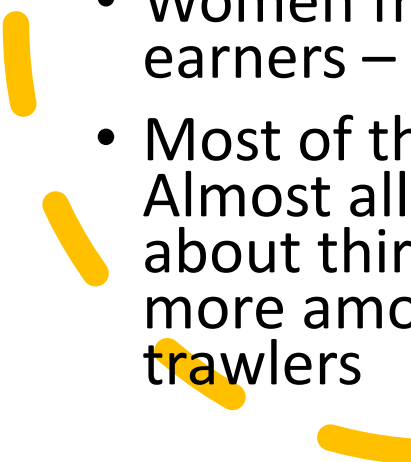
Methodology

- Convenient sampling
- Semi-structured survey of processors, wholesalers and retailers
 - 35 small, home-based, female dried fish processors
 - 15 women dried fish and 33 fresh fish retailers in the local market at Veraval (market consists of ~ 400 women)



Major Findings

- Family labour is critical in post harvest operations including drying; 80 per cent of the small units depend exclusively on family labour
- While large and medium sized units in the designated industrial cluster are all owned by men, women dominate small scale home-based dried fish processing
- Women in large numbers provide labour in sorting, cutting, gutting, cleaning and drying fish

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- There are distinct segments in the retail fish market – those who sell fish through shops, fish vendors, those who cut fish, vendors who sell fish from OBM and trawlers (multi-day fishing vessels), wholesalers of fresh fish, and dried fish sellers.
 - The fresh fish sellers and vendors are relatively younger – median age 42 – compared to dried fish mongers – median age 65 years. The latter were selling fresh fish when they were young.
 - Dried fish sellers appear more likely to be widows (11 out of 15 in our sample). All of them said that they took to this activity as they lost their husbands.
 - 13 out of the 15 dried fish sellers and 11 out of 15 fresh fish sellers are primary income providers to their households
 - Women from OBM-trawler households do not even identify them as income earners – they identified as ‘housewives’
 - Most of the (35 out of 48) respondents said they did not attend school. Almost all of the dried fish sellers are unschooled; among fresh fish sellers about third have some school education. The proportion of school educated is more among vendors who are members of fishing households who own OBM-trawlers
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Lack of economic resources and family support as also old age drive dried fish retailers to stick to the activity

- Dried fish selling requires less capital investment
- No risk of spoilage; no investment in ice etc.
- Fresh fish retailers have to be mobile. Old women cannot do so
- Wholesalers provide dried fish at the place of vending, which is convenient

Problems faced by women in the market

- Fresh water not available; they are forced to use dirty sea water for washing and cleaning of fish.
- No basic amenities available
- Market is open with no roof; women and their wares are constantly exposed to harsh sunlight
- Most do not possess a license to retail and hence are not eligible for any state support
- Applying for fish seller requires many documents and the process is cumbersome
- As part of the DFM project we helped 224 women to procure their licenses

- Our direct intervention in the market has exposed us to another aspect of women's lives – that they are under surveillance by community organisations that wield power over their social and business transactions
- The divisive politics of such organisations contribute significantly to the illbeing and unfreedom of women
- The vulnerabilities that arise from poverty and subordinate gender status get exacerbated by such politics preventing progressive changes

Conclusion

Despite women's significant participation in the post-harvest activities in the fisheries sector their work is invisible and grossly undervalued.

Not only that the fisheries value chain is structured in gendered ways, but women workers located as they are within distinct value chains experience specific challenges arising from the peculiar production relations that characterize the fisheries sector as also the patriarchal social relations.

Women fish workers' lives and livelihoods are simultaneously affected by constraints emanating from production, market, and climate crises as also cultural constructions of gender and social power.

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Thank you!!!

