

Women gleaners in Kerala, India: Assessment using the sustainable livelihood lens

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Gleaning (*Thappippidutham*)

- Traditional, selective fishing practice in shallow waters, locally called *thappippidutham* (“searching and catching”).
- Predominantly practised by women small-scale fishers worldwide, especially in estuarine and backwater regions.
- Uses indigenous, low-tech methods passed through generations but remains technologically simple (*Steipani et al., 2023; Nikita et al., 2022*).
- In Vembanad estuary (largest Ramsar wetland on Kerala’s southwest coast), it forms a key livelihood for inland fishing communities.
- Despite its physical demands and economic value, gleaning is informal, unorganized, and unrecognized as a fishing activity.
- This lack of recognition excludes women gleaners from fisher ID cards, welfare schemes, and social protection by the State.



Objectives

- Drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), this study seeks to highlight the often-overlooked contributions of women gleaners by examining how they mobilize livelihood assets, cope with vulnerabilities, and adopt strategies to sustain their households.
- To document the practices and methods of gleaning among women in the Vembanad estuarine region.
- To analyze how women mobilize various livelihood assets (natural, human, social, physical, and financial) using the SLF.
- To explore the environmental, economic, and institutional vulnerabilities faced by women gleaners.
- To examine the adaptive strategies adopted by gleaner and to identify the outcomes of these strategies.

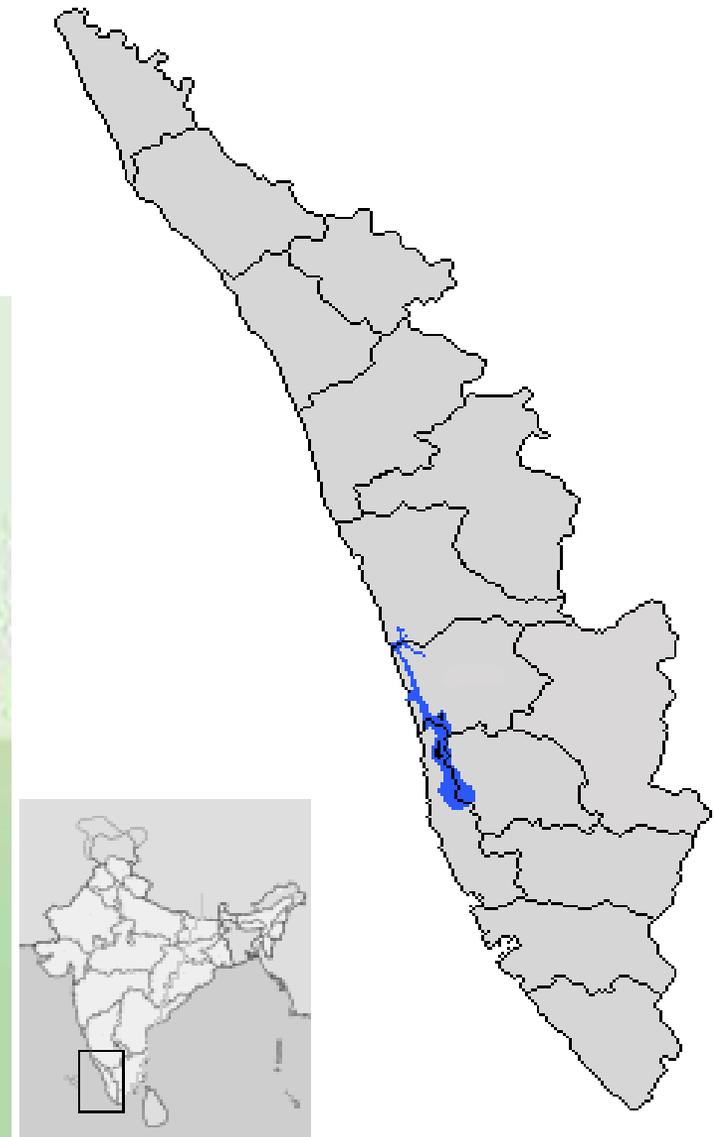
Materials and Methods

- A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) developed by DFID (1999).
- The study focused on 18 locations along Vembanad estuarine system across Alappuzha, Ernakulam, and Kottayam districts of Kerala, India.
- Sites were selected based on the presence of women engaged in small-scale, subsistence-oriented gleaning activities.
- Data collection methods included:
 - **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**
 - **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)**
 - **Field Observations**

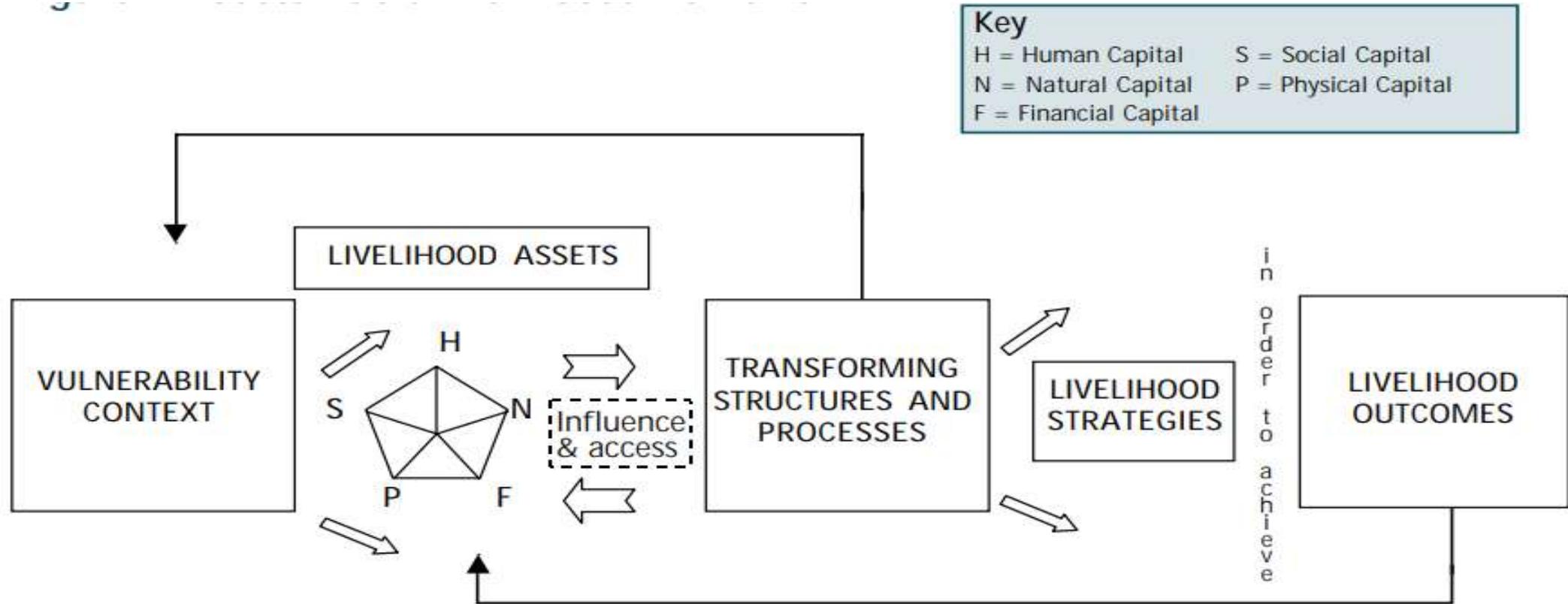


Location of the Study

- ❖ Vembanad Estuarine System
- ❖ Eighteen Fishing villages along the Vembanad lake



Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Livelihood Asset Analysis



Source: DFID (1999)



- In the context of women gleaners in the Vembanad estuarine system, SLF allows a structured examination of how their resources, capabilities, and constraints shape day-to-day survival and long-term well-being.
- The framework sheds light on how women cope with vulnerabilities arising from pollution, environmental decline, social marginalization, and lack of institutional recognition.
- Using SLF, the interplay between gender, informality, traditional knowledge, and resilience is better understood and articulated.

Results and Discussions

Gleaning as a Livelihood Practice

- Women across the Vembanad region practice gleaning using indigenous methods passed through generations.
- Typically aged 40–65 from scheduled caste communities, they work in shallow backwaters and paddy-shrimp fields, fishing 4–6 hours a day with bare hands, scoop nets, and pots.
- Activity starts early morning, aligned with the lunar cycle ('thakkam').
- Two patterns were observed: group gleaning in distant locations and gleaning in nearby fish-paddy fields after the culture season, requiring negotiation and catch-sharing with landowners.
- Their primary catch includes pearl spot, seabass, arius, gerres, prawns, and crabs. Daily earnings range from Rs. 500–1500, with part of the catch reserved for household use.

Capital Assets

Asset Type	Key Features
Human Capital	Generational knowledge; skills in fish detection using bare hands; physical endurance (4–6 hours in water); older women remain active despite risks.
Social Capital	Gleaning in groups; mutual aid (food, tools, transport); informal trust-based access to private fields; emotional and logistical support networks.
Natural Capital	Access to biodiverse estuarine backwaters, canals, paadams; knowledge of fish behavior, tidal cycles (thakkam); resource stewardship practices.
Physical Capital	Use of pots, scoop nets, small boats (manual/low HP engines); shared gear; informal market transport (canoes, auto-rickshaws).
Financial Capital	Income: Rs. 500–1500/day; reliance on informal loans with high repayment pressure; price negotiations; retention of high-value catch for household use.

Vulnerabilities

Women gleaners in the Vembanad region face a multitude of vulnerabilities that severely impact their livelihood sustainability.

- **Health risks:** Skin infections, eye/ear issues, and injuries from marine organisms due to prolonged water exposure.
- **Environmental issues:** Pollution, flooding, and bund operations (e.g., Thanneermukkam) disrupt fishing, especially during monsoons.
- **Economic pressures:** High debt burdens and dependency on informal credit; some need to earn ₹2000/day to repay loans.
- **Market exploitation:** Limited pricing control; auctioneers take up to 10% commission.
- **Lack of recognition:** Excluded from official fisher status and welfare benefits; often classified as agricultural laborers.

Livelihood Strategies and Outcomes

Strategies adopted:

- Group fishing provides shared food, tools, emotional and logistical support.
- Practices are finely attuned to lunar cycles and fish behaviour.
- Some women bypass exploitative auction markets by selling directly.
- Catch is often taken back home for better prices or reserved for family food security.

Outcomes observed:

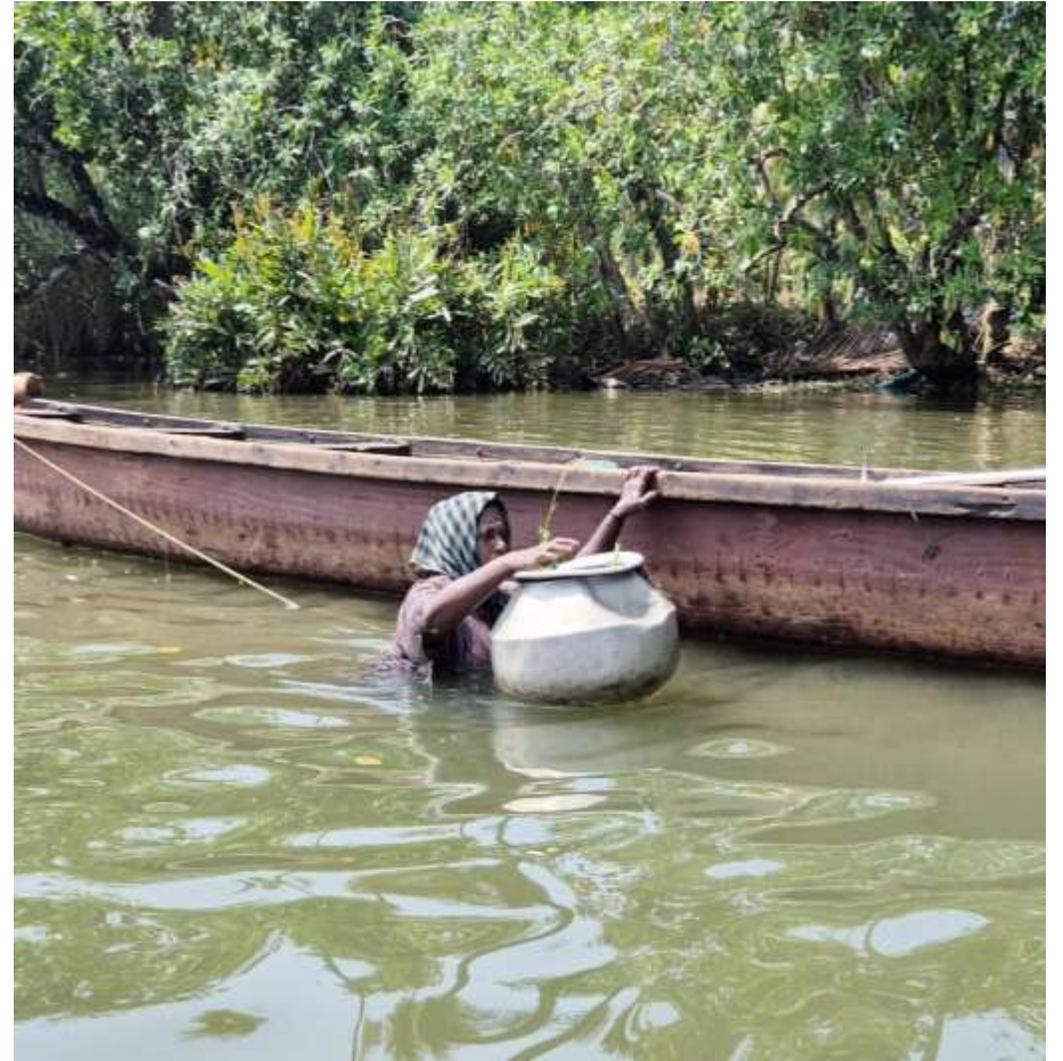
- Gleaning offers subsistence income, household autonomy, and social visibility, especially for older women.
- Persistent financial strain, health risks, and policy neglect undermine resilience.
- Lack of formal recognition blocks access to welfare and cooperative benefits.
- Adaptability shows resilience, but remains survival-focused, not transformative.
- This perpetuates cycles of poverty and invisibility.

Conclusion

- Women gleaners play a vital yet unrecognized role in Kerala's inland fisheries, contributing to local food systems and household sustenance.
- Using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, this study shows how they mobilize five forms of capital (human, natural, social, physical, financial) to cope with multiple vulnerabilities—exclusion, debt, environmental degradation, and health risks.
- Despite their resilience rooted in indigenous knowledge, collective practices, and ecological awareness, they remain marginalized in policy and welfare systems.
- They are excluded from fisher identity, statistical records, and protection schemes, reinforcing gender hierarchies in the fisheries sector.

The study calls for inclusive policy changes—including:

- Formal recognition of gleaning as fishing
- Provision of fisher identity cards
- Access to social protection schemes
- Community-rooted institutional support



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Thank You!