



**From Invisible Labour to Micro-Enterprise | Exploring
Women's Capabilities in the Dried Fish Value Chain of
Andhra Pradesh, India**

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From Invisible Workers to Micro-enterprises: Exploring Women's Capabilities in the Dried Fish Value Chain of Andhra Pradesh, India

- Women in dried fish processing in Andhra Pradesh, India, occupy a paradoxical position
 - Visible in local geographies and spaces
 - They occupy undervalued but central roles in dried fish value chains
 - Forms the backbone of household economies and local markets
 - Institutionally invisible in statistics and policies
 - Institutional classifications, policy discourses treat them as marginal, supplementary, or merely as supportive
- This paradox lies at the heart of women's position in the sector.
- **Framing women's work in dried fish processing as *invisible labour* obscures its entrepreneurial dimensions**
 - The skills in procurement, preservation, grading, and marketing that women exercise daily have major entrepreneurial dimensions.
 - They are not just passive participants but demonstrate multifaceted agency, not only shaping local economies but also sustaining households, preserving cultural knowledge, adapting to shocks, and negotiating social, ecological, and political spaces.
- **Reframing Women's Work in Dried Fish Processing Using the Capability Approach helps reveal women's agency and entrepreneurial potential, while exposing the constraints on their real freedoms**

The Capability Approach

- **Developed by Amartya Sen and expanded by Martha Nussbaum.**
- Amartya Sen's Capability Approach shifts focus from income, utility, or resources to people's actual capabilities — their real freedoms to do and be what they value.
- It is a way to assess well-being and development that goes beyond income or resources, focusing on what people are actually able to do and be — their real freedoms.

Key Concepts

- **Resources:**
Things people have (income, assets, skills, networks), and the public goods they can access (like institutional credit, market access, infrastructure, welfare schemes).
- **Capabilities:**
- Capabilities are the *real freedoms* people have to do and be what they value.
- They depend on both personal factors (like skills, health) and external factors (like social norms, environment, institutions).
- Capabilities are more than formal rights or freedom to do or be something— they are the *genuine opportunities* to achieve valued lives, such as earning securely, participating in decisions, and living with dignity.

- **Functionings:**

- What people actually achieve — capabilities that are realised.
- Depend on whether resources can be converted into outcomes

- **Conversion Factors:**

- Represent how much functioning one can get out of a good or service.
- *Personal conversion factors* are internal to the person (skills, health, education)
- *Social conversion factors* are factors from the society in which one lives, such as public policies, social and cultural norms, practices that discriminate, societal hierarchies, or power relations related to, for example, class, gender, race, or caste.
- *Environmental conversion factors* concern the physical or built environment in which a person lives.

Resources alone don't determine well-being — what matters is whether people can *actually use* them, given their circumstances.

- **Freedom & Agency:**

Development is about expanding the choices people have, not just raising incomes

Why Use the Capability Approach in this Study?

- **Beyond income and survival**
Moves analysis from subsistence earnings to women's *real freedoms* — well-being, dignity, and valued lives.
- **Recognises agency**
Frames labour in procurement, drying, storage, and marketing as *economic agency* and entrepreneurial capacity, not just marginal work.
- **Highlights conversion factors**
Shows how skills and resources are shaped by norms, caste/gender hierarchies, market exclusion, and weak institutions.
- **Achieved vs. unrealised capabilities**
Women secure food, income, resilience; but mobility, bargaining power, recognition, and enterprise growth remain constrained.
- **Policy relevance**
Identifies levers: credit, infrastructure, cooperatives, MSME/fisheries recognition to expand women's freedoms and transform livelihoods into micro-enterprise.

Key questions

- **Resources & Functionings**

How does dried fish processing sustain livelihoods in Andhra Pradesh, and what roles do women play in labour, entrepreneurship, and value addition?

- **Conversion Factors**

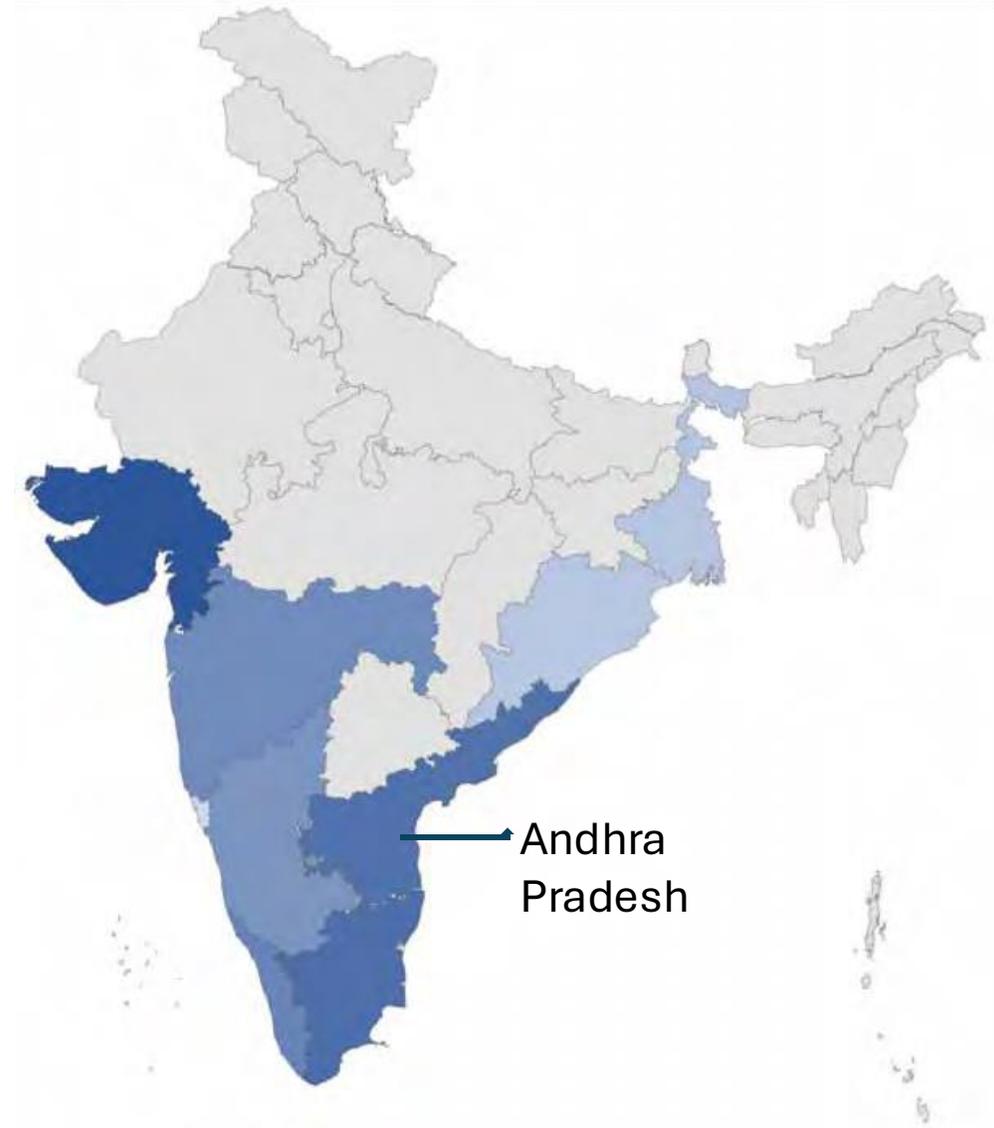
What structural and institutional conditions enable or constrain women in turning their resources and skills into entrepreneurial capabilities?

- **Expanding Capabilities**

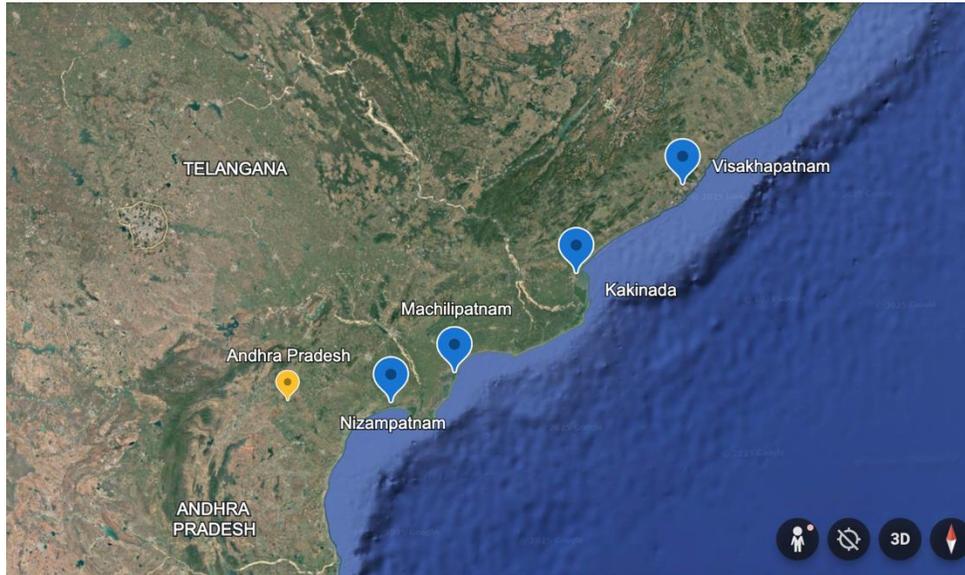
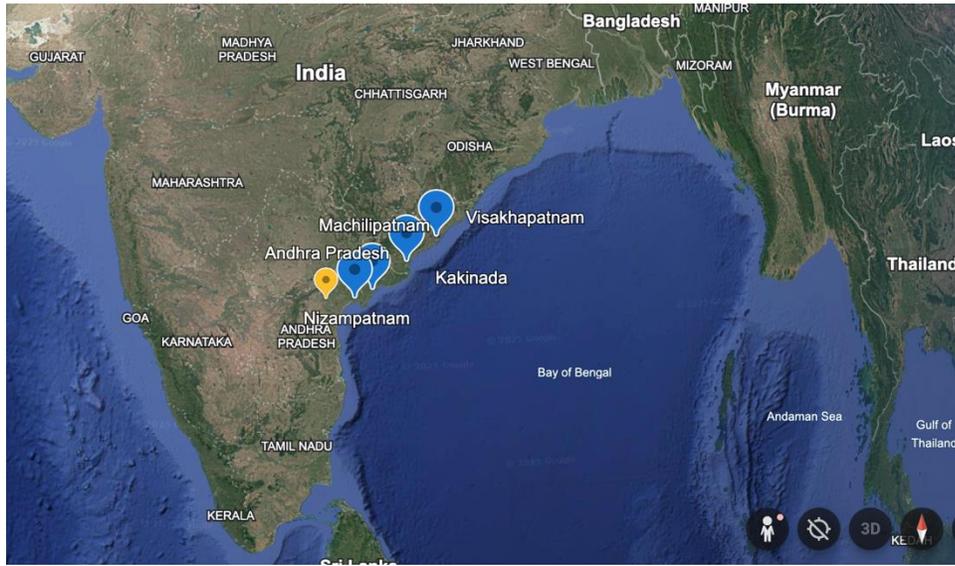
What policy measures and institutional supports are needed to recognise dried fish processing as a microenterprise, expand women's freedoms, and strengthen inclusive food systems?

The study location: Andhra Pradesh

State	Marine fish production (in lakh tonnes) 2018	In Percentage
Gujarat	7.01	18.81
Tamil Nadu	5.83	15.64
Andhra Pradesh	5.64	15.13
Kerala	4.75	12.74
Maharashtra	4.43	11.89
Karnataka	4.03	10.81
West Bengal	1.63	4.37
Odisha	1.58	4.24
Goa	1.01	2.71
Puducherry	0.44	1.18
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	0.4	1.07
Daman and Diu	0.32	0.86
Lakhsadweep	0.2	0.54
Total	37.27	100.00



Fisher population in Andhra Pradesh 14,96,688
Marine fishers – Male 461,712; Female 413,125



Location Map of the Study Area and Data

Harbour	Processors		
	M	F	T
Machilipatnam	1	15	16
Nizampatnam	4	12	16
Kakinada	2	10	12
Visakhapatnam	-	10	10
All	7	47	54

Who Are the Processors? A Socio-Economic Profile

Demographics

- Average age of the women processors is around 50 years, with more than two decades of experience in fish processing and drying
- Processors mainly belong to traditional fishing communities (Agnikula Kshatriya, Wada Balija)
- Approximately half of the processors had no formal education, relying on practical experience and ancestral knowledge.
- A significant number of women processors were widows, divorced, or separated
- Women navigate roles as primary earners and caretakers within their households
- Active participation of women in the fish drying and marketing activities

Scale of Activity

- About half of the processors engage in small-scale fish drying within their homes
- Primary reliance on family labor, mutual support among processors without wages

Assets and Infrastructure

- Most processors own small houses but lack sufficient land or space for drying activities
- Utilisation of government lands or public roads for drying fish
- Possession of essential equipment for drying (frames, mats, nets, baskets)



Financial Situation

Limited access to institutionalised finance due to a lack of significant assets
Dependence on money lenders for financial needs

Drivers of Invisibility and Marginalisation of Women's Work

- **Gendered Division of Labour**

- Men dominate the more visible and valued segments.
- Women are confined to procurement, cleaning, sorting, salting, drying, and mostly retail marketing, which are undervalued and unpaid/low-paid.
- This reinforces the perception that women's role is peripheral or secondary rather than central to the value chain

- **Intersectional marginalisation**

- Processing is associated with low-caste, marginalised communities.
- Women face double invisibility — as women and as members of disadvantaged groups — leading to stigma and neglect.

- **Informal and Unpaid Dimensions**

- Women often use family labour, kinship networks, or mutual exchange without wages.
- Income is irregular and low, making their work less visible in household or community accounts.

- **Lack of Formal Recognition**

- Dried fish processing is mostly home-based or roadside, not counted as formal employment.
- Women are rarely registered as workers under fisheries, MSME, or labour schemes.
- Their contribution is seen as an extension of household chores, not an economic activity.

- **Policy and Statistical Blind Spots**

- Fisheries policies and census data mostly highlight *catch volumes, boat ownership, and exports* — male-dominated activities.
- Women's processing and retailing is absent from official statistics, reinforcing invisibility.

- **Paradox of visibility vs recognition**

- Women processors are visible in everyday activities and spaces, in coastal villages but remain invisible in recognition.
- Visibility and profitability of the dried fish trade are largely captured by middlemen and traders.

Mapping Women's Resources: A Capability Perspective

- **Personal Resources (Human Capital)**
 - Knowledge & Skills: Women possess deep practical knowledge of fish drying, salting, and storage methods, often acquired informally through intergenerational transfer.
 - Experience: Many have worked in the sector for decades, enabling efficiency and quality control.
 - Resilience: As widows, single women, or primary household earners, they draw upon personal strength and adaptive capacity to sustain livelihoods.
 - Health & Labor Power: Their ability to engage in physically demanding processing work (e.g., handling, salting, drying) constitutes an essential resource, though it is vulnerable to exhaustion and health risks.
- **Material & Physical Resources**
 - Work Tools & Space: Women typically have access to simple tools (knives, baskets, drying mats) and drying yards, though often on insecure terms.
 - Fish Supply Access: They obtain small quantities of fish from local markets, landing centers, or through middlemen.
 - Housing/Storage: Some use parts of their homes or open yards as processing sites.
 - Lack of Capital Assets: Vehicles for procurement, cold storage, or mechanized equipment are rare, limiting expansion.
- **Social Resources (Social Capital)**
 - Informal Labor Sharing: Women help each other during peak periods (e.g., cleaning, drying, packing) without formal contracts.
 - Community Ties: Mutual trust and neighborhood networks act as safety nets.
 - Market Networks: Some women maintain long-standing ties with local traders, retailers, or middlemen.
- **Institutional Resources (Enabling Environment)**
 - Government Programs: Occasional access to welfare schemes
 - NGO Support: Limited support from NGOs and others
- Policy Frameworks: Formal recognition of women in fisheries is weak, but state welfare schemes (e.g., pensions, SHG loans) occasionally benefit them.

Mapping Functionings (Capabilities realised/ constrained)

Capabilities Realised

- Women ensure household food security and local market supply.
- Maintain cultural knowledge of preservation techniques.
- Yet, their agency remains undervalued, and their upward mobility curtailed by structural inequalities and intersectional marginalities.

Capabilities Constrained

- Excluded from formal entrepreneurship, preventing enterprise growth.
- Limited productivity and income security due to a lack of credit, infrastructure, and cooperatives.
- Skills in procurement, preservation, and marketing remain undervalued, obscuring entrepreneurial roles.
- Inability to participate in decision-making spaces (e.g., cooperatives, MSME forums).
- Intersecting marginalities (gender, caste, class) reduce substantive freedoms, constraining women from achieving dignified and secure livelihoods.

Conversion Factors Shaping Women's Capabilities

Conversion Factor	Facilitators / Constraints	Role	Outcome on Capabilities & Agency
Personal	Skills, experience, entrepreneurial initiatives (Facilitator)	Support procurement, processing, preservation, and marketing	Enable livelihood capability but limited recognition as entrepreneurs constrains professionalisation and agency
	Low literacy, limited mobility, health issues from sun/salt exposure (Constraint)	Restrict capacity to scale up/diversify	Constrain real freedoms; reduce long-term sustainability of livelihoods
	Intersectional marginality (widowhood, caste, age) (Constraint)	Shapes precarity and exclusion	Reduces agency; creates generational and caste-based inequities
Social	Informal networks of kinship and community support (Facilitator)	Provide labour, sharing arrangements, and mutual help	Enhance resilience, allow survival in crises
	Social hierarchies, gender norms, caste barriers (Constraint)	Assign women's work as 'menial' or 'secondary'	Limit recognition of women as entrepreneurs; constrain dignity and bargaining power
	Market intermediaries controlling prices (Constraint)	Mediate access to buyers and pricing	Restrict women's capability to negotiate fair returns; increase dependence
Environmental	Coastal ecology providing raw material (fish availability, salting/drying environment) (Facilitator)	Forms the ecological base for processing	Enables continuity of traditional livelihoods
	Seasonality, climate shocks, declining fish catch (Constraint)	Affect fish supply and processing cycles	Reduce livelihood stability; constrain ability to plan and expand enterprises
	Poor infrastructure (drying yards, storage, sanitation) (Constraint)	Limits safe, hygienic processing	Constrains capability to ensure quality, expand to higher-value markets
Institutional / Policy	Government schemes, fisheries cooperatives, welfare programmes (if accessible) (Facilitator)	Provide limited access to credit, subsidies, support	Expand capabilities where accessible; enhance agency in governance spaces
	Policies focused on large-scale fisheries, aquaculture (Constraint)	Neglect women-led dried fish enterprises	Excludes them from support schemes; reduces institutional visibility
	Need for formal registration and tax records (Constraint)	Precondition for access to schemes	Keeps women invisible in statistics; limits real freedom to claim entitlements
	Gendered and caste-based exclusion from forums and schemes (Constraint)	Marginalises women further	Restricts agency in decision-making and fair market participation

Barriers to Women's Agency in Dried Fish Processing

Constraint / Barrier	Effect on Women's Work	Restricted Capability (Real Freedom & Agency)
Informality & subsistence label: Work is informal, home-based, unregistered	Seen as subsistence, not enterprise	Freedom to be recognised as entrepreneurs; access to legal/institutional support denied
Low entry barriers & low capital use: Low capital, poor infrastructure (drying yards, storage, cold chains)	Limited productivity; small-scale survival only	Capability to expand, professionalise, or scale up enterprises blocked
Gendered perceptions of labour (seen as extension of domestic chores)	Women's skills undervalued, agency ignored	Agency to negotiate fair returns, credit, and recognition as economic actors and not helper
Lack of market visibility: Dependence on male intermediaries for markets	Limited price control, low bargaining power	Freedom to set fair prices, build independent trading networks denied
Policy & institutional bias toward large-scale fisheries	Women's contributions invisible in statistics	Capability to access policy support, credit, subsidies, and representation in fisheries governance limited

Addressing Constraints to Expand Capabilities & Real Freedoms (Solution)

Constraint / Barrier	Action / Intervention	Expanded Capability (Real Freedom & Agency)
Work seen as informal, unregistered	Formal recognition & registration as entrepreneurial activity or micro enterprise	Recognition as entrepreneurs; access to welfare schemes, credit, legal protection
Lack of credit & infrastructure	Tailored micro-credit with low interest rates; investment in drying yards, storage, cold chains and safe market places	Ability to scale up, sustain enterprises, improve productivity
Gendered perceptions of women's labour	Awareness campaigns; impart training in processing and marketing as a skilled enterprise, recognition of women's traditional knowledge in preservation	Agency to be seen as entrepreneurs, not just helpers
Dependence on male intermediaries	Women's cooperatives for collective bargaining, product branding, digital platforms for direct market entry	Fair returns, price-setting power, independence from middlemen
Policy neglect & invisibility in statistics	Integration into fisheries/MSME policies; disaggregated data	Representation in decision-making bodies of fisheries, access to institutional and welfare schemes

Conclusion

- Reframing dried fish processing as an entrepreneurial activity and micro-enterprise shifts it from invisibility and marginalisation into a recognised, supported, and scalable livelihood.
 - This reframing is not only economic but is fundamental to expanding women's substantive freedoms and agency.
- Moving beyond its treatment as informal subsistence work enables the legitimisation of women's contributions, wider access to credit and markets, and the revaluation of their labour as entrepreneurial and skilled.
 - This transformation strengthens gender inclusion and enhances the resilience of fisheries-based food systems in Andhra Pradesh and beyond.

Thank you