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## The Global Pandemic and Its Impact on Fisher-Folk Women's Socioeconomic Livelihoods in Kollam District, Kerala

Sharon Ann Thomas<sup>1</sup> and Rajeev MM<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MSW, The Banyan, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Rajasthan, India

\*Corresponding Author: Rajeev MM, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Rajasthan, India.

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### Abstract

The pandemic and subsequent shutdown in India have significantly harmed the livelihoods of fishing communities all around the nation. The lockdown has a long-term effect on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, notably on local and regional food systems, storage, and market chains, even while it may help control the corona virus. Thousands of fishermen have lost their jobs as a result of the destructed pandemic, which has worsened inequality and poverty. The goal of the current study was to examine how COVID-19 affected the lives of women who work as fishermen in Kerala's Kollam region. The researcher used a descriptive design to investigate the problems and hardships faced by women fishermen. The study came to acceptable conclusions in comprehending the challenges that women encountered because of the pandemic time and its restrictions. Most of them are unable to work and earn low wages, resulting in financial issues and lifestyle changes following the epidemic. The findings show that a unique framework involving civil society organizations and local self-government institutions is required to address catastrophes and other concerns.

**Keywords:** Epidemics, Lockdown, Vulnerable Communities, Descriptive Design

### Introduction

The global pandemic, COVID-19, has unforeseeable effects on all sectors of the economy worldwide, including the fishing industry. The fisheries industry is critical to the economy since it provides millions of people with food and jobs while defining and contributing to the survival of many coastal towns. COVID-19 had a significant communal impact, particularly on the Fishermen's community. During the first part of the pandemic, harbors were closed as the situation worsened, and fishermen were restricted from going to sea. As a Fisher Folk, a lady who sells fish relies on the Fisherman who travels to the sea. The lockdown has caused various issues for women, including transportation and money. They began to rely on bigger vessels known as HM Nets rather than smaller boats. Because most women come to the city to sell their fish, the urban community relies more on larger than smaller fish. The system had altered throughout the epidemic; the government started to set specific rules where the fishermen could go on alternative days, reducing the community's income. During the seasonal period and the COVID pandemic, it had become more challenging for them to sell their fish. Even people's lifestyles had altered, with some benefiting but incurring massive debts that did not help them or their families.

In India, fisheries sector plays a vital role in the socioeconomic development of the economy. Its function is significant in providing food & employment to millions of people and contributing to National GDP. Before the pandemic period, fishermen would tell a price and then sell it, which helped women by allowing them to acquire the price they desired. The Kerala state government enacted a provision under which the fish would be weighed, and a specific quantity would be set aside for them. Due to the physical distance, only a few Fisher women can buy fish from the Fishermen in the landing centers. Most of them cannot bring a decent income to their family, which has drastically changed the life of a Fisher Folk woman. Globally, compared to cis-men, women and members of minority gender groups tend to earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in informal sectors. These conditions make them vulnerable to the economic impact of COVID-19. Historically, most economic recessions are seen as "he-cessions,"

followed by “she-recoveries,” where female-dominated industries form the backbone of the economic recovery. The opposite is true for COVID-19, colloquially termed a “she-cession,” as female-dominated service sector jobs were the first to disappear, while male-dominated sectors such as construction have remained viable. Thus, men’s wallets have been less affected. Accordingly, women’s poverty rate is expected to increase by almost 10% globally. Moreover, those women who did not lose their jobs are often employed in the healthcare sector, working on the frontline of the pandemic. Women of color are especially likely to be employed in healthcare positions that put them in direct physical contact with patients.

### **Rationale of the Study**

The researcher has been examining the lives of Fisher Folk women, particularly those who sell fish, who are not treated with dignity in society. The researcher enjoys positive relationships with a few ladies in the neighborhood. Most women are over 30 years old, and they do this to support their families and supplement their income. The government’s programs and activities for this neighborhood must be improved, and women are not benefiting. The experience of the Fisher Folk women during the epidemic prompted the researcher to visit the Thangaserry community to learn about the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives. So As a result, the study will improve the researchers’ grasp of the matter, and the findings will be a beneficial solution to the present problem and a basis for future involvement by the Fisher Folk community.

Socioeconomic vulnerability among the Fisher Folk women selling fish is high due to the pandemic. Due to the situation, their income has been reduced, and the livelihood has changed for many women and their families, transportation issues and the lack of government and non-governmental organization support. In order to do this, it should be studied in various ways, especially with the women selling fish for their living, as most of the women are above 50 years of age and earn the money they get through selling. Here the study is intended to understand the Livelihood and economic, lifestyle, and women issues within the family of women before and after a pandemic period.

### **Summary of Reviews**

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. Since then, the pandemic has expanded its reach, threatening many fish-producing and fish-consuming countries around the globe. While fishing and aquaculture and the distribution of their products are considered essential activities in most countries, the measures adopted to contain the spread of infection have caused significant direct and indirect challenges to the sector. Governments swiftly adopted prevention and control measures to slow the rate of infection, including stay-at-home orders. These caused significant disruptions in consumer demand for fish, resulting in a drop of 10 percent in global fishing activity concerning the previous income and revenues of those working in fisheries and aquaculture. However, in some cases, the pandemic also strengthened local markets and increased locally sourced fish through quick adaptation to new marketing strategies, including online purchasing and e-commerce. An increase in the demand for non-perishable seafood, such as canned, frozen, and processed seafood, was also registered in OECD countries. As fishery products are a highly traded commodity, the sector is structurally dependent on trade, consumer demand, effective distribution channels, access to markets and processing facilities, and employment of migrant workers.

Furthermore, this sector needs help in fishing and marketing activities while keeping social distancing. Several social protection measures have been introduced by governments worldwide to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on food security and poverty in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Although measures have been implemented ex-novo in many countries, several governments expanded existing schemes by increasing the coverage, the benefit value, and the duration of existing programs and by introducing outstanding payments or transfers.

Several social protection measures have been introduced by governments worldwide to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on food security and poverty in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Although measures have been implemented ex-novo in many countries, several governments expanded existing schemes by increasing the coverage, the benefit value, and the duration of existing programs and by introducing outstanding payments or transfers. The COVID-19 scare has instilled fear among the Fishing Community. If members are to go into home quarantine, it will become hard for them as their homes are too small for such an act of isolation. Sea-going men of the families usually sleep on the beaches on the beach during non-monsoon months.

Women’s fish vendors are considerably affected due to the lockdown as there is no fishing activity and, in some places, only narrow boats are fishing. The low catch brought to the landing center is subjected to high demand. Even when few women purchase an affordable number of fishes from the landing center for street vending, people are not purchasing the fish due to the pandemic. Customers have also seen bargaining for lower prices. Due to this, their income has reduced, and they face difficulty managing their families. Many fishing families have expressed that besides income loss, the lockdown has seriously disturbed planned activities such as boat and net repair, construction of boats, and repaying the loans taken for varied fishing purposes.

Catholic fishermen are impoverished but adventurous, aggressive, and creative compared to the other two religious’ communities. The Christian fisher folk is often said to be Kerala’s ‘real’ fisher folk. Ram, who has worked amongst the

Mukkuva Christians of the south, traces the low status of the fisher folk in the society to their geographical isolation and being concentrated in the coastal areas, in slum-like and crowded settlements. Other development-related indicators such as lack of income-earning opportunities, poverty, and deprivation, unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to essential services such as water, sanitation, and electricity, poor health conditions amongst men and women, higher infant mortality rates, lower sex ratio and lack of access to health facilities, also show evidence of this neglect and marginalization of the fisher folk in the state. Fisher folk always need more money and live on a day-to-day basis. They depend highly on moneylenders and traders. They spend all their lives managing the burden of debts, leading to 'cyclical poverty,' as Deitrich and Nayak call it, leading to poverty, low income, poor health, and malnutrition.

Women play a significant role in all fishing activities, right from harvesting. In the per-harvest period, women in the marine sector make and mend nets and prepare hooks and baits. During the harvest season, women spend much time in activities such as netting in the estuaries, clam, and mussel picking, collecting seaweed, and also pearl diving in a few cases (Nayak & Vijayan, 1996). There is a strong sexual division of labor within the fishing community. Women are generally not allowed to participate in fishing activities involving going to the sea, and their activities are usually restricted to the domestic sphere.

All other fish-related activities, such as drying and peeling of fish, are carried out by the women within their domestic spheres of activities. It is ubiquitous to see women working in groups near their houses in a typical fishing village. Older women in the fishing community usually carry out the job of fish trading, but younger women are not allowed to work as fish traders. Most women participating in fishing come from Christian and Hindu communities. Very few Muslim women participate in fishing activities.

### **Aim and Study Objectives**

To study the Socioeconomic factors like lifestyle, economics, and related issues within the family that made it more difficult for the Women Fisher Folk in the context of Covid 19 in Thangaserry in Kollam. The study objectives are (a) to Evaluate the Lifestyle Changes of the Fisher Folk women during the pandemic period, (b) to study the Livelihood and Economic Changes during the pandemic period, (c) to study the women's issues within the family during the Pandemic period.

### **Methods and Materials**

This study will be a Qualitative Data collection which is the procedure for collecting, analyzing, and then by descriptive method to understand the problem more thoroughly. Using Qualitative Analysis, the researcher can collect the data by asking broad, general questions and listening to the participant's voice. A phenomenological approach to qualitative research focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. Phenomenology helps us to understand the meaning of people's lived experiences. A phenomenological study explores what people experience and focuses on their experience of a phenomenon. The research design used in this study will be the descriptive type, providing more details on the research topic. The researcher has used the descriptive design to understand the problems and the difficulties faced by the Women Fishers Folk during the pandemic.

**Universe of the Study** age group above 30-45 years. They are the women considered to be present in the study. The area that was taken for the study was Thangaserry in Kollam District in Kerala State. Thangaserry is the coastal area that is situated in the Kollam cooperation. The sample size was 10 Fisher Folk women who sell fish. Purposive sampling was used in the study because of the nature of the research. Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental sampling. The researcher has predetermined operational definitions to research if respondents can satisfy them, they are selected for this study. The areas focus on study demands a respondent with rich Knowledge and experience. Respondent's nature and availability forced to choose purposive sampling. Ten samples were selected using purposive sampling from the coastal communities. These respondents were willing to participate in the study during the Covid lockdown and share data without hesitation.

This study aims to develop an understanding of the Socio-Economic Impact of Covid 19 on Women Fishers Folk at Thangaserry in Kollam District in Kerala State. The Study will help the researcher understand the problems women faced due to the pandemic period and its restriction. Most of them are restricted from going to work and are not getting good incomes, leading to financial crises and lifestyle changes after this pandemic. The Study will provide a clear idea about the impact of COVID on Women's Fisher Folk.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In India, over Nine Million people depend on fisheries for their livelihood, of which 80per cent are small-scale fishers. The industry employs over 14 million people and contributes 1.1 percent of the Indian GDP. Fishing mainly involves traditional fishing crafts, motorized boats, and small mechanized crafts. Overall, the east coast region produces 25 percent of total Indian marine landings. Some of the key themes derived from the study are as follows.

### **Lifestyle During the Pandemic Period**

The pandemic period changed the respondents' lifestyles. The use of tobacco was reduced as most of the shops were not open. They started to stay back home and only go out a little as most of them would spend some time with the neighbors, and that also was reduced.

### **Use of Mask**

One day, when I was selling Fish, the police came and asked me to leave; they were chasing me away while the people who had put up stalls were still over there working, and even the customers they sometimes do not keep distance from me and I tell them to move as even I have to take care of my health" as the use of mask was new for the women who were selling the Fish during the pandemic period. The Pandemic period made most respondents change their lifestyle when they went to selling Fish the mask that should be used. Most of the respondents were above 60 years of age; they felt it was a significant relief and it reduced many health problems.

### **Interaction with the Community**

When it comes to social interaction with the community, it was difficult for the respondents as it needed to bring more practical impact. At times they sit around with the neighbors and have conversations. The leisure activities they were practicing, like talking with their same age group members and practicing religious practices, were not practiced during the pandemic period.

### **Food Changes**

One of the respondents said, with heavy heartening, as she was crying when she had said this, "I have given my name for the Kit, but they are not providing me even after I had given a request. I do not know how to manage my household without proper food, and no one can help me." During the pandemic, the State Government was providing basic needs like rice and even MATSYAFED, a government sector working for the Fisherman community providing kits to the community where; Proper Fish during the pandemic period had changed their food style completely when it comes in point of selling Fish as most of them visit 10 to 15 homes which are far from their hometown.

### **The Changing Business Structure**

The stalls have become a threat for some of the respondents. Sometimes they feel difficult when the customers come close to them even after they give them a warning. Regarding selling the Fish, the respondents have felt difficulty because the government has put a fixed price rate for the Fish, which is 120, and the Auctioneers do not give it according to the rate, which does not benefit them. Before the pandemic, they did not have problems, and it was always benefiting both the members but after the pandemic, there were specific rules that should be followed, and when it comes to the Fish, they take it for a fixed rate the Fish that, they will be both small and big but when they put it in the vessel for the respondents on the top the good ones and in the middle the ones which are not that good and at the end some which contain both are good and flawed; due to this, the customers sometimes need to take the ones that are not good, and their income goes low.

### **Livelihood and Economic Changes**

The respondents sell the fish directly after collecting it from the auctioneers. They sometimes feel it difficult in public transport as most of them are restricted. However, they started using Autos for transportation, and the money they got also had to be spent on transportation; they needed help managing their basic needs and even their homes. There were times when people did not take fish from them, as in the beginning, the coastal areas were considered the most affected area by Covid. They borrow money from other people and then pay them back later for transportation.

### **The Wave of Financial Recession**

One of the respondents said that as she started 40 years selling fish due to Covid, the way of living made more difficult where she said she was crying because of the pandemic period; her voice was low, and at times it was stammering and said: "I cannot pay my electricity bill and water". The economic level of the respondents started to reduce. The basic needs like Proper sanitation, electricity, and drinking water facilities suit the respondents. The process that was followed during the pandemic period was the respondents go at night around 10:00 pm and take the fish. They keep it on the ice for some time at their homes, and the following day, around 9:30 am, they leave for work, and most of the respondents go to specific homes and then return by 2:00 pm.

### **Government and Non-Governmental Help to Mitigate Suffering**

One of the respondents said, "I had met with an accident and have several health issues, and I ask money from others for my needs at times when I do not go to work, and because of the pandemic I stay back at home with my family. I cannot always depend on my children". The Government has provided certain loans, like from MATSYAFED; at the beginning of the pandemic, they were given 20,000 without interest. The respondents were not much satisfied as they were already in debt. The money was given to places where they had to. The MATSYAFED is an auxiliary work; they are not involved as working Fisherwomen. The Minister of Fisheries offered an initial level of financial support, but they still need to get the money due to Covid and the election. It is still pending.

Non - Governmental sectors did not provide any support to the respondents. The Government and Private sectors were working, from the respondents were restricted from work which did not bring an outcome for the group. 90% of the respondents did not join any SHG groups as even after they did, it did not last much; there was no trust between each other, so they did not have any other income base. The respondents needed to be informed of the available schemes and policies; they depend on the Chitty, a private sector where they give money for lesser interest and then get in total. Nevertheless, at times that also has led to corruption; the respondents are more dependent on the private sector.

Regarding the distribution of the Kit, all the respondents from the BPL category were getting it. Above 65 years old women do not get any benefit from the MATSAYAFED. The restriction was only for the coast where there were many talks that the massive spread was from the coastal areas as they lived together and were not let to work, making them and their family in low income. The family Budget planning for a week before the pandemic was according to their daily job basis, but after the pandemic, the working days had reduced. Also, their income started to reduce, so their way of living slowly went down. 50% of the respondents benefited and did not face any loss because when they sell it at houses, some people buy it for a considerable amount and then get the money they want. The changes that happened during the pandemic period was the fixed price, where they cannot ask for more than the price, but the vending did not go as it was followed before the pandemic; they could get according to the price the fisherman would give according to how the fish would be sold, and it would benefit them. Identity cards are provided the MATSAYAFED to all the respondents so that they will avoid many problems while traveling.

### **Issues of Women within the Children**

One of the respondents said: "My son left me during the lockdown. My Daughter in law never took care of me and was not happy staying with me; they just left one day, and I did not know now I live alone." The women's issues within the family, especially in coastal areas, are high, like Domestic violence, issues with children, issues with the other family members, and physical abuse. The men drink and the lack of response of children after getting married is another major issue. The respondent starts feeling alone, and they still go to work for a living. 30% of the respondent's children lack education because of the community and their income. The family member's support for the respondents was not much, as they wanted to live independently with the money they got. The relatives would leave who stayed close by for the education of the children leave and move to other places. 60% of the respondent's husbands are no more, so they look after their families by selling fish. Most of them do it for the education of the children.

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### **Issues of Women with the Husband**

One respondent said, "I was not able to study because the situation at my home was not good. I was not allowed to study after marriage; my husband used to drink and hit me for the past 12 years. I have been doing this job and do not want my children to face the same situation. 50% of the respondent's husbands are no more and 20% of the respondents are fishermen, and 10% were addicted to alcohol which did not help them in their life.

### **Government Policies to Revitalize the Fisheries Industry**

For small-scale fishermen, the post-monsoon catch is a significant source of income. The catch is more diversified than

in previous seasons, and the proceeds from the spring auction assure the community's nutrition throughout the fish prohibition time. The prohibition season is also the time for net and boat repair and maintenance. Without the spring catch and sale, the community would face financial strain as they would need loans to cover maintenance costs to start fishing after the ban period.

According to M S Swaminathan Research Foundation 2020), their income has reduced, and they face difficulty managing their families. The factors responsible for the economic crisis are the lockdown during the pandemic period and the restrictions. The researcher residing in the community for the past 23 years, understood that the women's lifestyle had changed when they moved from the coastal area to the cities and started to give more education to their children. The researcher residing in Thangaserry understood that tobacco use among women was widespread earlier, especially in the Fisherwomen community. Non - Governmental sectors did not provide any support to the respondents. The Government and Private sectors were working, from the respondents were restricted from work which did not bring an outcome for the group. 90% of the respondents did not join any SHG groups as even after they did, it did not last much; there was no trust between each other, so they did not have any other income base. The respondents needed to be informed of the available schemes and policies; they depend on the Chitty, a private sector where they give money for lesser interest and then get in total. Nevertheless, at times that also has led to corruption; the respondents are more dependent on the private sector.

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not involved as working Fisherwomen. The Minister of Fisheries offered initial financial support, but they still need to get the money due to Covid and the election. It is still pending.

### **Conclusions**

The fishing industry has grown into a critical sector, providing a source of income for fishermen while also employing a sizable section of the population and contributing to national food security and valuable foreign exchange revenues. It is vital to modernizing the sector with new fishing methods and several new components associated with using marine oceanic fisheries resources. The Fisheries Department is regularizing fishing crafts operating in the Union Territory to regulate fishing efforts and conserve fishery resources by implementing uniform online registration, color coding, and ensuring sea safety equipment and marine risk insurance for the safety of fishermen and fishing crafts. The study is being carried out to determine how the epidemic has affected the women fishermen in Thangaserry, Kollam District, Kerala state. The study is being undertaken with ten female Fisher Folk. COVID-19 has influenced women in the fishing industry.

It has brought various difficulties, like being neglected and prevented from working throughout the pandemic. Most women needed to be made aware of policy-level measures that may help them earn a living. Women's education levels were deficient during the pandemic, and their income levels began to fall. The alteration noticed among women occurred when they started to use masks, which assisted them in improving their health. During the conversation with the women, it became clear that vending and money lender fixed pricing had posed a significant danger to them, producing a significant impact in the economic sector and impacting their families and children.

There was also less interaction with the community and religious practice throughout the pandemic. The absence of transportation had another significant effect on the fisher people women who sold seafood. During the epidemic, women's anxieties about their children and families increased, which hindered their social activities. The COVID-19 outbreak has been labeled a global health emergency, raising concerns in poor countries such as India. With skilled leadership, India has taken the pandemic on as a challenge and is doing all necessary to combat it. Simultaneously, the government and policymakers must be prepared to mitigate the impact of the shock and the economy's V-shaped recovery in the post-COVID period [1-9].

### **Possible Recommendations**

Developing a practical Social Policy suggestion that places a greater emphasis on women is critical. Civil society organizations operating in this area must provide sufficient training for the local population on the concept and operation of SHG groups. The fisheries sector should raise awareness among these minority populations and ensure them of policy-level actions to assist marginalized and emerging women. A social work practitioner may use this to undertake additional intervention by entering the field and analyzing the socioeconomic effect. Social workers can also take the initiative to help women develop their abilities and connect them with accessible resources.

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