6. Beyond the Shores: A Study on Women Fish Vendors in Madgaon, Goa

-Divya Keni

Abstract

The fish industry of Goa is central to its economy and gastronomy, with traditional fishing communities like the 'Kharvi' following a gendered division of labour. Men go into the waters using boats, while the women in the family (typically their wives), sell the catch in the market, making them the face of fish vending. Over time, changes like the introduction of mechanisation through trawlers, along with an 'influx' of 'ghati' migrants in the state, have altered the landscape. This paper aims to dive into the nuances of this process and the changes seen, as experienced by women fish vendors. It looks into the economic sustainability of the occupation, the gender dynamics present with respect to the traditional gender roles, and ultimately explores the challenges faced by women and their implications on occupational continuity. The paper concludes by highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon at play as a lack of economic opportunities prompts migration, with a simultaneous economic and social marginalisation of women fish vendors.

Keywords

- Goa
- Fisheries
- Fisherwomen
- Gendered Labour
- Informal Economy

Introduction

The fisherwomen of Goa represent a rich cultural legacy with the state's coastal economy making them an enduring feature. Yet, behind this symbol lies a complex web of gendered exchanges, marginalisation, and contradictions that compel us to bring into question the dominant notion of development and modernisation. Women fish vendors act as the connecting link between producers and consumers by typically working in processing and retail. Despite their centrality to the process, their social position invites systematic undervaluation of their tasks, invisibility in public policies

and exclusion from steps towards equitable development.

This paper seeks to explore the socio-economic aspects of the lives of Goan women fish vendors, examining how their work is shaped by intersecting forces of gender, caste and class. Upon providing a brief geographical, economic, and social context, the paper looks into three objectives. The first one attempts to understand the link between sales patterns and the women's economic sustenance. Next, we analyse the gender dynamics present within fishing and its retail. Insights relating to the gendered division of labour are highlighted, which differ based on the location of work (retail or wholesale market) and community of workers (Goan Kharvi or non-Goans) involved. Lastly, we identify the challenges, shifts seen over the years, and continuity of the occupation. This section explores structural inequalities like caste and its omnipresent nature, questions like education and migration of their succeeding generation and the legacy that traditional fishing methods hold.

Like many other Indian states, Goa has been surrounded by a variety of stereotypes, among which are - parties, alcohol, coconut groves, beaches, and the infamous fish. While some of these are indeed tied to parts of Goan life, they risk overshadowing the region's deeper cultural and social fabric. Understanding the state demands a respect for its people and the variety of historical, and socio-cultural influences that have moulded its way of life over the years. The region's tropical environment, marked by seasonal monsoons, fosters a rich biodiversity and sustains agrarian and fishing economies. Beyond its physical characteristics, Goa's history as a Portuguese colony has had a major impact on its social fabric, resulting in a unique combination of cultural practices, as evident in its architecture, language, and daily life.

Historically, Goa's social structure was based on the Hindu caste system, shaping employment, marriage, and social connections (Da Silva Gracias 31). It continued even after some Hindus converted to Christianity. Prior to the Land Tiller's Act of 1964, higher-caste Gaunkars (landlords) dominated land ownership and political authority, resulting in considerable socioeconomic inequities. In 1510, Afonso de Albuquerque's arrival and establishment of the Portuguese Estado da Índia is said to have marked a turning point in the position of women in Goa with changes [1] that gradually improved their living standards under colonial control.

Goa's economy is greatly boosted by the fishing industry, which accounts for 17% of the state's GDP and 3% of the GDP from agriculture. The state exported 14,699 tonnes of fish in 2019–2020, at a total of Rs. 288.5 crores. Between 5 and 10 percent of the population make their living from fishing alone, as well as from related sectors like processing and vending. More than 90% of people in Goa depend on fish as a main source of nutrition. 3,669 tonnes of inland fish and 86,027 tonnes of marine fish are produced on average each year, making up approximately 2% of all fish produced in India (Gb and Mujawar 3). According to the Department of Fisheries of the

Government of Goa, and the issues mentioned in the Goa Fish Trails in 2014, marine fish production increased from 24,600 tons in 1965 to 87,984 tons in 2013.

Traditional Goan fisherfolk are typically divided into two groups: Kharvi or Gabit (Hindu) and Catholic Kharvi. These communities fall under the 'Shudra' caste status. They follow a gendered division of labour, wherein men venture into the sea using boats to fish and the processing and selling of fish is largely done by women. Some women also sell door-to-door, on foot, increasing their market range. Moreover, they were also involved in net-making prior to the introduction of machine-made nets. This was typically the case until the mid-1970s, but as the business expanded, we see a shift from a caste-based occupation towards decentring caste as a factor (Rubinoff 2).

Women make up one-third of the labour force in the fishing industry in India, with about 1.6 million of the 5.4 million workers in the fishing industry (Meghna and Kumari 2). Fishing communities in Goa have traditionally had more equitable gender relations than other sectors in India. Fisherwomen are involved in not only fish sales but also take financial decisions for their families. However, their involvement in the fishing industry is typically undervalued and unrecorded. They endure cultural devaluation, since they are frequently perceived as unclean or uncouth, which can lead to internalized shame about their jobs despite their contributions to family prosperity. This disconnect highlights the irony that their economic success does not convert into social status.

Given the sociological and economic importance of fisheries in society, it is critical to investigate the role of fisherwomen. The absence of sustained scholarly attentions has contributed to obscuring their struggle and achievements, maintaining gender inequities in both the economic and social spheres. Thus, this study aims to fill a significant void by providing an examination of the lives of Goan fisherwomen, with a focus on those working in the Madgaon city markets. By focusing on this group, the study hopes to investigate the socioeconomic aspects of their work, the obstacles they confront, and the broader ramifications of their positions in fish production and distribution networks.

Methodology

Primary data was collected by interviewing three fisherwomen from the SGPDA Retail Market and one from a local market in Santemol in the village of Raia in Madgaon, all of whom had been in the business for more than twenty years. Additional interviews were conducted with a Ramponkar [2] family, a migrant cycle fish vendor, and a mother-daughter duo who sell dried fish, with an aim of gaining a holistic view of varying experiences of each. Due to limited accessibility and reluctance of the vendors to be interviewed, a snowball sampling method was employed to facilitate efficient data collection.

The Link between Sales Patterns and Economic Sustainability

Sales patterns of the vendors are typically influenced by three factors– the monsoon season, days of the week, and the amount of leftover unsold fish. Significant importance must also be given to the illegal sale of fish in retail in the wholesale market, providing consumers with an opportunity to eliminate one stakeholder in the transaction.

Economic Sustainability

As observed, most of these fisherwomen do not possess a bank account and the ones who did, had to shut it down post the COVID-19 pandemic. This can perhaps be attributed to the sudden reduction of consumers visiting the market due to the lockdown. It is also possible that their work never made it to a monetary scale large enough to need one. Sustenance is considered a priority over profits. As Alshin [3] puts it - *"sushegad raoche"*- indicating an outlook towards life that entails gratitude and satisfaction with what one has over wishing for the 'luxuries'.

Upon observation, one can see the difference in lifestyles of the women from the rest of the society. An example to illustrate the same would be the recent surge in the use of online payment methods like UPI by customers. In a free-market economy, one is required to keep themselves updated with technological advancement in order to not suffer a lag. However, for the vendors, whose transactions have always taken place in cash, lack of bank accounts due to the reasons mentioned earlier, keep them from switching to digital modes. They do not earn enough in a day to sustain the accounts. This creates a vicious cycle for the women that becomes progressively harder to get out of. Additionally, subsistence-level earnings preclude the possibility of any accumulation of wealth. A traditional society based on a sustenance economy does not demand the individual to seek material consumption beyond their need. However, contemporary times stand on the contrary. An increased cost of living that pushes the limits of sustenance.

Analysing the Gender Dynamics within the Sales Context

For the purpose of better understanding, in this section, gender will be looked at using a binary model.

Sexual Division of Labour

Traditionally, fisherfolk communities like the 'Ramponkars' would follow a sex-based division of labour in their occupation. This division is upheld by those following the occupation with the belief in men's ability to go into the waters and women's lack thereof. Women on the other hand are assigned the work of sales. Samantha D'Souza in her study done on the fisherwomen of western coast in India talks about how the reasons for notallowing women to fish are deeply rooted in cultural values, traditions and gender roles - which portray inherently a discriminatory and stereotypical image of women (D'Souza 19) 4 . However, it becomes essential to note that such notions are not relevant to our area of study. Whilst it is a matter of fact that there is a division of labour among the fishing community of Madgaon, it need not be viewed through the lens of inequality, for there seems to be an alternative justification. It is rather seen as a function that each member of the traditional fisherfolk family fulfils in order to earn a livelihood.

We may instead call attention to the reason behind women being associated with products to be sold. Gendered marketing, as an influential phenomenon, has played a major role in reinforcing the division of labour. It inquires whether or not there is an effect of keeping the product right next to a female seller. To contextualise it, how does a female selling fish affect the customers? Does it lead to higher sales? Or does it produce no effect at all? While not much study is done on it in Goa, this can be understood in terms of how a female vendor is perceived. They are seen as more courteous, understanding, sincere as well as good listeners. Male buyers find them more organized while female buyers find them to be more sympathetic and understanding according to the established social norms. Hence, it would be right to conclude that in a market setting, given that a female vendor is seen as more approachable, women are associated with selling (Sojka et al 3). This suggests difference from explicit sexualization or mere aesthetic appeal to attract the customer. A rather affective response is elicited. As observed, over the years, the market has also accommodated male vendors.

Wholesale Market

For many families, once the male member of the family died, the women, in order to earn a living, were compelled to buy their stock from other sellers. All the interviewees buy their stock for sale in bulk, early in the morning, from the Madgaon Wholesale Fish Market, located nearby the SGDP market. Small trucks filled with all types of fish from either Goa or neighbouring sources line up on the open ground. These vendors are typically men. Negotiation is a daily activity undertaken by the women when buying their fish stock from the male wholesale sellers. With not very high scope for profits, they make sure to not suffer losses during the purchase. What makes this particular aspect of the process interesting is that the wholesale vendors are technically sellers just like the local female vendors. The complete domination of men in this area can be

linked to the spectrum of labour intensity. Depending on how labour oriented the task is (since the catch must be transported by a vehicle to the wholesale market) along with the quantity of the fish handled for sale, sales as a task gets taken over by male members of the family.

Migrant Labour

The fisherwomen face low profitability with changes in consumer preference post the COVID-19 pandemic. It accelerated a transition in the consumption pattern wherein increasing numbers of people began switching to home delivery services instead of purchasing seafood at traditional markets. Additionally, based on the data collected, there was an influx of migrant labourers or 'ghati' [4] from neighbouring regions into the fish industry. The labourers are men and though historically dominated by women, the sales market saw a move, as male vendors made use of cycles and motorbikes for selling fish directly to households. This trend reverses the conventional gendered division of labour. It must be understood that such a shift in the conventional norms do not guarantee, or even nearly, imply, that women will benefit. These women, throughout the years, have been working as fish vendors as their livelihood solely depends on it. Hence, a sudden shift as such extends no aid even as it defies norms. What is noteworthy is how men can enter into female "designated" labour areas, but women cannot, making this dynamic highly unequal.

Community identity

Although this business takes place in a shared location, one can't be assured about its collective nature. The trade is individualistic and hence, may involve frequent quarrels. However, the interviews suggest that in case of external threats the vendors come together in unity to defend each other.

An interesting perspective is highlighted when one of the interviewees who sells in the village she hails from implied stronger interpersonal relations among villagers in situations of needs. Therefore, despite people belonging to different occupations, their identity as a member of that particular village takes precedence. On the other hand, for the women in the market, their occupational identity as a woman fish vendor precedes and forms the basis for community orientation. When asked about any trade unions, no significant data could be gathered regarding the presence of a prominent union in the community.

Identifying the Challenges faced in the Profession, Changes over the Years, and their Implications for Occupational Continuity

Challenges and changes over the years

According to the data collected, the fisherwomen highlight the several internal and external challenges faced by them such as lack of cleanliness and irregular supply of water in the market space. The prevalence of various health issues along with their inability to access healthcare due to its high cost add onto feelings of boredom and frustration with the occupation for one of the interviewees. The external challenges they face highlighted an increase in the cost of living and a disproportionate raise in income. A significant challenge that is posed on the livelihood of the women is due to the influx of *'Cyclekar'* or the *'Ghati'* migrants. Migrant fish vendors deliver fish door-to-door, offering convenience to customers, reflecting a diversion from the need to visit the market. The fisherwomen being fixed-place vendors selling from fixed stalls, are led towards an area of exclusion and increasing competition (especially within themselves) due to the shift in consumer preferences. Consequently, their income is affected and the long-standing economic and social organization of fish vending—wherein women have dominated markets— erodes away. At the same time, this creates an imbalance in seller-customer ratio with an inordinate increase in the number of sellers. Additionally, illegal and unlicensed fishing by migrants impacts the quantity and quality of the catch from the sea itself.

Fishing has traditionally been the occupation of the Kharvi community of Goa, who belong to the 'Shudra' caste. Conversions during the time of Portuguese occupation othe land have led to a division between Catholic and Hindu Kharvi, with common underlying rituals being followed. Upon investigation, although the women were generationally into the business, 3 of the 4 interviewees did not belong to the Kharvi community, highlighting a delinking of caste and occupation.The women reported an elevation in terms of social status over the years with a decrease in stigmatisation and isolation. An incident during the data collection process however demands attention. As one of the vendors was trying to attract a customer, a few droplets of the fish water splashed onto the buyer. The situation was met with immediate hostility along with the comment 'we are not like you' being passed by the latter. An interdependence of labour among the residents of a locality or city should ideally entail respect. Fish curry and rice are a staple diet for Goans transcending caste, class and religious boundaries. Incidents like these reflect how entrenched the caste system and its characteristics like segregation—social and spatial—are in Indian society, despite heavy reliance on extraction of labour from those of the lower strata.

Occupational continuity

This section considers two stakeholders, the fisherwomen and their children, with the previously discussed internal and external challenges having a significant bearing on the perception of the occupation. Due to their age and years of constant engagement with day-long labour, a sudden end to one's routine due to age may cause feelings of lethargy, emptiness and idleness, impacting the mental and emotional well-being of the

fisherwomen. Alongside, independence and the want to continue working as long as it is physically feasible for them is what keeps the traditional methods of fish sale alive. Their children however have a contrary stand that could perhaps be considered emotionally disengaged from one's occupation. Attainment of education and a desire to pursue an independent career drives them further away from a sustenance-based occupation. Of the women interviewed, their children wished to emigrate to foreign lands like Qatar and London. What is interesting to observe however, are the gender dynamics present in this context: daughters of the women were somehow still involved in the occupation as they helped their mothers at work, doing supplementary tasks. On the other hand, sons of all the interviewees were uninvolved in the business. This perhaps highlights the gendered nature of socialisation where young girls are primarily handed over the task of "helping" their mothers with her tasks. Boys are expected to earn for themselves and work independently, guiding the family towards prosperity.

Continuity of any occupation becomes necessary as multiple factors depend on it, some of which include economic stability, intergenerational skill transfer, and preservation of culture (especially pertaining to traditional fishing). But one particular challenge to its long-term sustainability is the reluctance of succeeding generations to carry on the work. This shift can be attributed to numerous factors such as desires to attend further education, exposure to more desirable alternatives as well as viewing fishing as an unstable source of income. In addition, urbanization and changing social mobility trends lead to increased differences between the younger generation and traditional ways of life, hence which results in occupational displacement. As the interviewed fisherwomen for this research emphasized, traditional fishing no longer generates substantial amounts of profit as their labour operates on a hand-to-mouth basis and not yielding surplus income. As a system based on exploitation, capitalism prefers businesses that are rooted in its own standards of rationality while avoiding subsistence economies by placing greater emphasis on market forces and profit accumulation over interpersonal or community relations. Goan fisherwomen have traditionally been active in the evolution of community relations beyond being sellers, fostering community ties with the local buyers. Their labour is denied socio-cultural value as their relations are turned into those of mere exchange under the conditions of economic arrangements that value a depersonalised trade. Hence, the decline of prosperity in this occupation results in reluctance to continue as fishermen/women.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study brings attention to the vulnerable status of the fisherwomen of Madgaon, as it is measured by unstable income, market competition, and the lack of technological adaptation. Functional but rigid division of labour is present, where men progressively enter into areas traditionally controlled by women. Their livelihood is also undermined by the presence of migrant sellers, costly living expenses, and long- term

social stigmas. Fisherwomen are resilient and organized, but as youngergenerations look for other jobs, occupational continuity and retention of Goa's cultural essence becomes uncertain. The traditional occupation of fish vending falls under threat due to changing market forces, prompting a need for interventions to facilitate these women to maintain their livelihoods. Further scientific investigation could be undertaken to better understand their situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the position of migrant labourers could provide a holistic picture, prompting interventions that promote developments and security for each stakeholder.

End Notes

[1] They were allowed rights to their father's property during the first century of Portuguese rule, a progressive development that came centuries before similar legal improvements elsewhere in India. These changes were first aimed at Christian converts but were later extended, with some constraints, to non-Christian women.
[2] A traditional fishing community in Goa, members of the wider 'Kharvi' group. The fishing net they use is called 'rampon' in Konkani.
[3] One of the interviewees.
[4] A slang term used to refer to typically migrant blue-collar labourers in Goa.

Works Cited

Bhat, N. S., and N. Rao. "History of Goa with Special Reference to Its Feudal Features." *Indian Historical Review,* vol. 40, no. 2, Nov. 2013, pp. 249–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/0376983613499680.

Borges, Charles J., and Helmut Feldmann. *Goa and Portugal: Their Cultural Links*. Concept Pub. Co, 1997.

D'Cruz, Sharon, and Avinash V. Raikar. "Ramponkars in Goa: Between Modernisation, Government and the Deep Blue Sea." *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 39, no. 20, 15 May 2004, pp. 2048–54, www.jstor.org/stable/4415030.

D'Souza, Samantha. *Unmasking the Silent Role Fisherwomen Play in the Small-Scale Fisheries Local Value Chain in India*. 2020.

Da Silva Gracias, Fatima. *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa, 1510-1961*. Concept Publishing Company, 1996.

Dessai, Ashoka G. *Environment, Resources and Sustainable Tourism*. Springer Nature, 2023.

GB, S., and S. Mujawar. "Fisheries Sector of Goa: Present Status, Challenges and Opportunities." *Life & Life Processes: Interdisciplinary Approach for Sustainable Development,* National Seminar, 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353339428

"Goan Fish Trail 2014." *Directorate of Fisheries,* Department of Fisheries, 2014. https://fisheries.goa.gov.in/goan-fish-trail-2014/

Maria, Emma. *Women in Portuguese Goa, 1510-1835*. Institute for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, MESHAR, 2002.

Meghna, and Bibha Kumari. "The Role of Informal Education in Fisher Women's Struggle for Survival in the Fish Market." *Asian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Research,* vol. 21, no. 3, Sciencedomain International, Feb. 2023, pp. 38–43. https://doi.org/10.9734/ajfar/2023/v21i3542.

Parab, Manda. "Preliminary Study of Socio-Economic Status of Fish Vendors in Goa." *Latitude*, vol. 8, no. 1, Dec. 2021, pp. 24–28.

Rao, P. S. *Fishery Economics and Management in India*. Pioneer Publishers, 1983.

Reisenbichler, Alexander, and Gaikwad John S. "Caste in Goa: Glimpses of Transition from Caste to Class." *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology,* vol. 6, no. 3, Apex Publishing, Dec. 2023, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.61186/ijes.6.3.1.

Rubinoff, Janet Ahner. "Fishing for Status." *Women's Studies International Forum,* vol. 22, no. 6, Nov. 1999, pp. 631–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-5395(99)00073-4.

Sharon D'Cruz, and Avinash V. Raikar. "Ramponkars in Goa: Between Modernisation, Government and the Deep Blue Sea." *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 39, no. 20, 2004, pp. 2048–54. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4415030.

Sojka, Jane Z., et al. "Asian Purchasing Agents' Perceptions of Women Sales Representatives." *Women in Management Review,* vol. 16, no. 7, Nov. 2001, pp. 325–33. https://doi.org/10.1108/eum0000000006114 .

Sonak, Sangeeta M. *Marine Shells of Goa*. Springer, 2017.

Tyabji, Zoya. "Recognizing the Invisible Role of Women in India's Fisheries." *Blogs.dal.ca,* Dalhousie University, 1 Mar. 2022. https://blogs.dal.ca/openthink/recognizing-the-invisible-role-of-women-in-indias-fisheries/

About the Author

Divya Keni is an incoming MA student with a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Sophia College (Empowered Autonomous), Mumbai. Her areas of interest lie at the intersection of International relations, development and labour studies, along with a focus on gender and sexuality. She is keen to deepen her understanding of the fields and conduct interdisciplinary research, critically examining social structures and power relations.

Acknowledgement

This research project was undertaken as part of the requirements for completion of the Bachelor's degree in Sociology at Sophia College (Empowered Autonomous). I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Principal of Sophia College (Empowered Autonomous), Mumbai, and the Head of the Department of Sociology, Dr. Anagha Tendulkar Patil, for providing me with the opportunity to engage in qualitative social research. I am immensely grateful to Dr. Sachin Moraes, Head of the Department of Sociology at Parvatibai Chowgule College (Autonomous), Madgaon, Goa, for his critical role in helping me conceptualize this study. His ability to challenge perspectives and highlight unexplored dimensions of research encouraged me to push my

boundaries. A special note of appreciation goes to my guide, Ms. Sukanya Menon, whose unwavering support and mentorship have been foundational to my academic growth. Her patience in attending to my countless doubts, and meticulous feedback has been instrumental in shaping not only this research but also my approach to sociology as a whole. Finally, this study would not have been possible without the participants who so generously shared their stories with me. Their voices, their lived experiences, and their resilience are the very essence of this work. Their willingness to open up about their realities, struggles, and triumphs has made this research not just an academic endeavour but a deeply human one. Their contributions are the heartbeat of this study, and for that, I am profoundly grateful.