



AGRI MAGAZINE

(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)

Volume: 02, Issue: 10 (October, 2025)

Available online at <http://www.agrimagazine.in>

© Agri Magazine, ISSN: 3048-8656

Waves of Change: Empowering Women in Fisheries through Social Innovation

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In the coastal town of Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, every morning begins with the rhythmic hustle of women carrying baskets of freshly caught fish to the markets. While men head out to sea, it's the women who dominate the shores sorting, cleaning, drying, and selling the catch. In fact, across Maharashtra's coastal communities, women account for over 60% of the post-harvest fisheries workforce, yet their contributions have long remained invisible in policy and planning. Now, innovative initiatives like the Matsyasutra digital literacy program and women-led fish processing cooperatives in places like Sindhudurg are rewriting that story. These social innovations are equipping women with tools to improve their incomes, access markets directly, and gain recognition as key players in the blue economy.

The Invisible Role of Women in Fisheries

Women play a crucial yet often unrecognized role in the fisheries sector, particularly in post-harvest activities, fish marketing, and processing. In post-harvest work, women are primarily involved in cleaning, sorting, grading, drying, and peeling fish—tasks that ensure product quality and market value. In fish marketing, they act as key intermediaries, selling fish in local markets and ensuring a steady flow of income for fishing households. Women also engage extensively in fish processing and trading, including drying, salting, fermenting, and packaging, which add significant value to fish products and support food security in coastal communities. Despite their vital contributions, women in fisheries face numerous challenges. Their work is often undervalued and goes unrecognized in official statistics and policies. Limited access to credit and capital restricts their ability to expand enterprises or invest in better technologies. Moreover, women are largely excluded from decision-making bodies and fisheries management institutions, leaving their voices unheard in planning and governance. Recognizing and empowering women in fisheries is essential for achieving gender equity and sustainable development in the sector.

Social Innovation

Social innovation refers to new ideas, practices, or solutions that address social problems and improve people's lives in a sustainable way. It focuses on creating positive social change rather than just economic gain. In fisheries, examples include mobile apps that share real-time fish market prices, helping fishers get fair value for their catch; women-led cooperatives that promote equality and collective strength; and community financing models that support small-scale fishers with local credit and savings options. These innovations encourage participation, build trust, and strengthen communities. By promoting sustainability, equity, and inclusive growth, social innovation ensures that development benefits everyone especially marginalized groups—while protecting natural resources for future generations.

1. Mumbai and Ratnagiri: Women Fish Vendors' Cooperatives

In coastal districts like Mumbai and Ratnagiri, women fish vendors have come together to form cooperatives such as the *Maharashtra Machhimar Mahila Sahakari Sangh* and *Ratnagiri Mahila Matsya Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha*. These cooperatives help women access

microcredit, refrigeration facilities, and collective bargaining power. Earlier, women worked independently, facing exploitation by middlemen and fluctuating prices. Now, they can buy fish directly from landing centers and sell it in local markets at better rates. “Before joining the cooperative, I barely earned enough to manage,” says a vendor from Ratnagiri. “Now, we earn more and save together.” These cooperatives have enhanced women’s economic security and established them as key players in Maharashtra’s fish marketing network.

2. Sassoon Dock, Mumbai: Gender-Sensitive Innovations in Fish Processing

At Sassoon Dock, hundreds of women are employed in shrimp peeling and fish processing, often under strenuous conditions. Recognizing their challenges, initiatives led by the Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE) introduced ergonomic tools and improved peeling tables to reduce physical strain and health risks. Women were trained in safe post-harvest handling, waste management, and hygiene practices. “Earlier, back pain and hand cuts were routine. Now, with better tools, we work comfortably,” says a woman processor. These gender-sensitive innovations have improved efficiency, reduced drudgery, and given women greater dignity and recognition in the post-harvest fisheries workforce.

3. Palghar District: Self-Help Groups and Community Financing

In the fishing villages of Palghar, women-led self-help groups (SHGs) have become powerful engines of community finance. Supported by the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the Department of Fisheries, these SHGs provide loans for small-scale fish vending, drying, and fish pickle enterprises. Members collectively save, invest, and market their products under shared brand names. “We don’t depend on moneylenders anymore,” says a fisherwoman from Satpati. “Our SHG is our own bank.” This model has built financial resilience, encouraged entrepreneurship, and promoted solidarity among coastal women.

4. Sindhudurg: Eco-Friendly Dry Fish Production by Women Groups

In Sindhudurg district, women’s collectives have adopted eco-friendly fish drying techniques using solar dryers supported by the Maharashtra State Innovation Society and local NGOs. Earlier, open-sun drying led to contamination and losses due to weather. The solar dryers improved product hygiene, shelf life, and market value, helping women access urban and export markets. “With solar drying, our fish looks cleaner and sells faster,” says a group member from Devgad. This initiative combines technology and traditional skills, ensuring sustainable livelihoods while promoting environmental conservation.

The Broader Impact: Why It Matters?

Empowering women in fisheries is not just a matter of social justice it is essential for achieving sustainable development. Women’s active participation directly contributes to **Gender Equality (SDG 5)** by recognizing their roles, improving access to resources, and ensuring equal decision-making opportunities in the sector. When women gain financial independence and leadership roles, families experience improved education, nutrition, and overall well-being.

In terms of **Sustainable Fisheries (SDG 14)**, women are often the custodians of post-harvest practices and resource management at the community level. Their traditional knowledge and responsible handling practices support sustainable harvesting, reduce waste, and promote value addition. Furthermore, women’s involvement strengthens **climate resilience**, as they adopt adaptive livelihood strategies—such as diversified fish processing and eco-friendly technologies—that help coastal communities cope with changing marine conditions.

By empowering women, fisheries become more inclusive, productive, and environmentally sustainable. When women thrive, entire communities benefit—socially, economically, and ecologically creating a ripple effect that strengthens both livelihoods and marine ecosystems for future generations.

Challenges that Remain

Despite notable progress, women in fisheries continue to face persistent barriers. Cultural resistance remains one of the biggest challenges traditional norms often limit women’s

mobility, ownership of assets, and participation in leadership roles within cooperatives or management bodies. Many women still lack access to modern technology, finance, and training, which restricts their ability to improve productivity or start independent enterprises. Limited credit facilities and collateral requirements further widen the economic gap. Moreover, while gender-sensitive policies exist on paper, their implementation and enforcement remain weak. Women are rarely included in fisheries planning or resource management decisions, leading to inequitable benefit-sharing. Addressing these challenges requires continuous efforts to mainstream gender in fisheries policies, strengthen institutional support, and promote awareness at the community level ensuring that women's contributions are recognized, valued, and supported at every stage of the fisheries value chain.

Conclusion

Empowering women in fisheries isn't just about fairness it's about securing the future of coastal communities. When women are given equal access to resources, technology, and decision-making spaces, the entire fisheries sector becomes stronger, more resilient, and sustainable. The stories from Maharashtra show that when women rise, families prosper, and communities thrive. By embracing social innovation, promoting gender equity, and recognizing women as leaders in the blue economy, we can ensure that the waves of change reach every shore creating a future where both people and the planet flourish together.